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A HANDS-ON EXPLORATION OF THE HALO CREATOR'S NEW UNIVERSE

DESTINY

THE NEXT GENERATION OF MULTIPLAYER GAMING

HOW SONY MADE PS4 AN INDIE PARADISE

INSIDE THE UK'S UNDERGROUND ARCADE REVIVAL

STEVEN POOLE TAKES ON THE CONSOLE WAR

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BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS
FINAL FANTASY XIV
PUPPETEER
SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

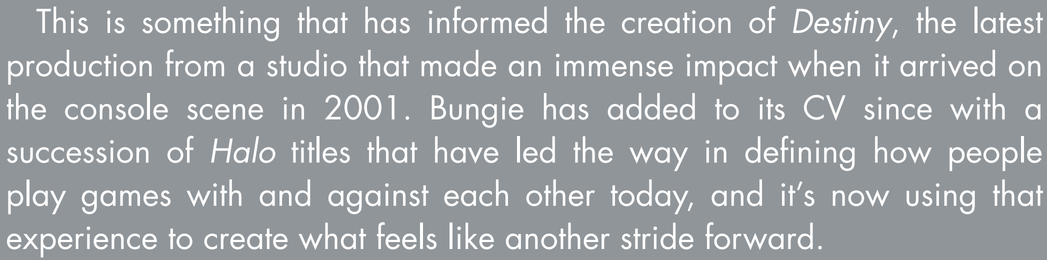
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Seeking friends for the end of the world

About halfway through Shaun Of The Dead, our hero and his ragtag band of friends and family happen across another group of survivors. The encounter is only a short scene, and it exists purely to set up a visual gag, but in that moment the dynamic of Shaun's plight changes significantly. Suddenly it's not just one small posse of humans making a stand against the apocalypse, which is how the story has been told until this point. Characteristically, Shaun doesn't propose the sensible option of merging the groups in order to raise their overall chances of survival (sensible options rarely present the best opportunities for comedy), but the mere existence of others like him provides a fragment of hope. Most things are better when they're shared – even a suburban zombie outbreak.





This is something that has informed the creation of *Destiny*, the latest production from a studio that made an immense impact when it arrived on the console scene in 2001. Bungie has added to its CV since with a succession of *Halo* titles that have led the way in defining how people play games with and against each other today, and it's now using that experience to create what feels like another stride forward.

However, while *Destiny*'s take on multiplayer feels like it belongs to the next generation, when it arrives in 2014 the game will roll out across PS3 and 360, too, exposing it to the largest possible console market, not simply a slice of the fledgling PS4 and Xbox One audiences. Such an expansive launchpad makes sense when you consider the extent of Bungie's ambitions. This is a studio with few rivals when it comes to exploring themes and ideas over successive instalments, and in *Destiny* it already has plans for four distinct games over an eight-year period. When Bungie COO Pete Parsons talks about building a universe that will be spoken of in the same breath as Star Wars, it doesn't seem outrageous. He and his team explain their vision in detail beginning on p60.



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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



WLEDGE

Despite admirable dedication to indie developers, and playing host to some of indie's greatest hits, Sony (1) has struggled to raise its voice above the formidable noise generated by XBLA – and this despite numerous nightmarish accounts from indie developers burned by the experience of working with Microsoft. That's changing now, as Sony all but positions indies front and centre of its PS4 strategy, building on a past that includes Net Yaroze, PlayStation Minis and in-house incubation programmes. Sony has indie in its blood, and on p10 we look at what it's doing to reinforce that. The PC has a thriving indie scene too, of course, but it's MOBAs (2) that are attracting the biggest audiences. On p14 we investigate how multiplayer online battle arena games became the biggest genre in the world without anybody noticing. And on p16 we find out if the Ouya revolution (3) delivers on lofty promises made by its Kickstarter campaign. Big Fish Game's iOS adventure *Fetch* is, well, rather fetching, which is why you'll like art director Brian Thompson's work (4) on p18. In Soundbytes (5) on p20 former head of hardware Jeri Ellsworth exposes Valve's "high school" cliques, while EA's Peter Moore laments Wii U's out of step nature. Finally, on p24, Chronicle screenwriter Max Landis (6) recalls smashing up consoles with his fists and why games tell such good stories, in My Favourite Game.



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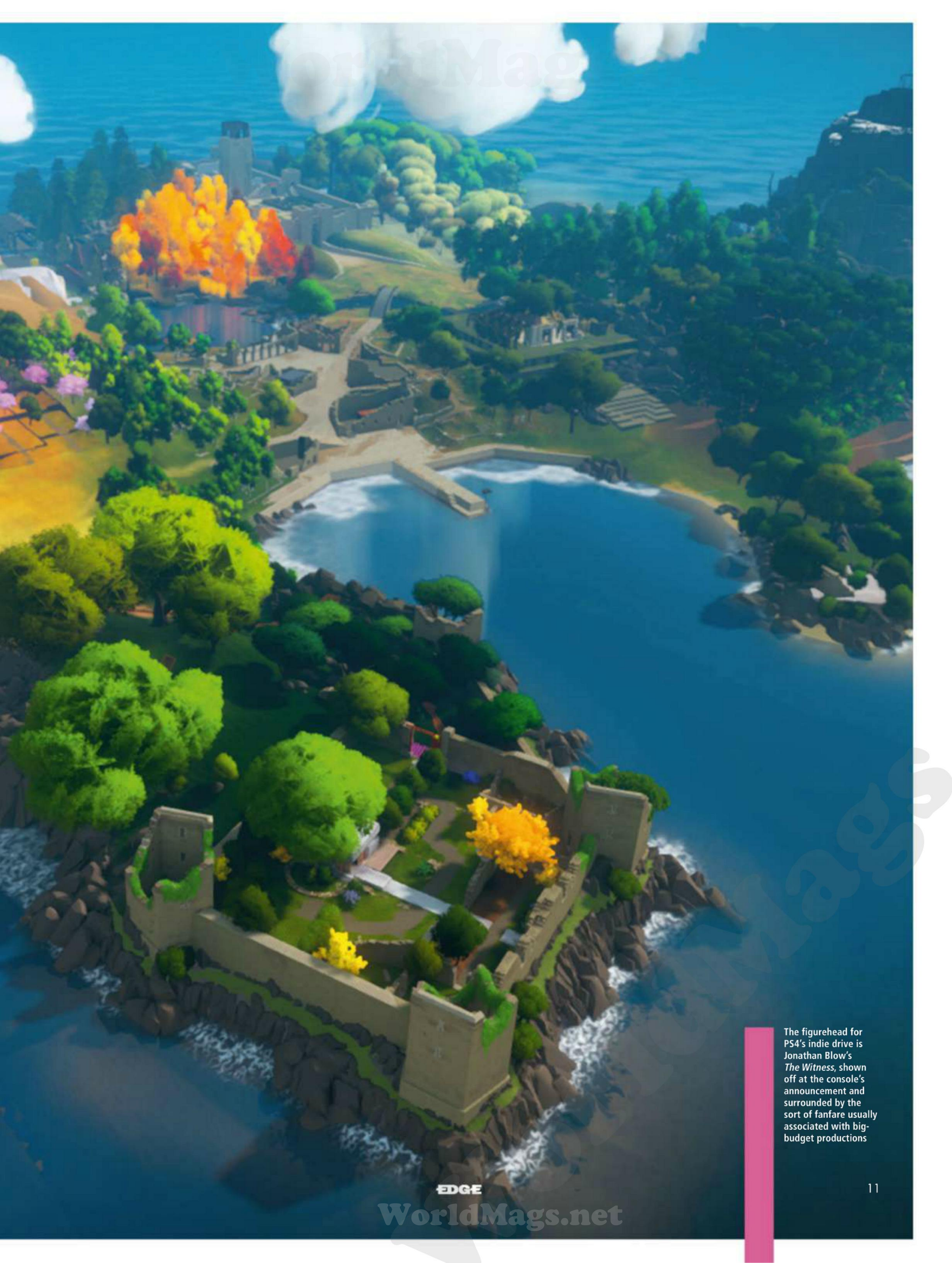
Sony's thriving indie landscape

How past experience with independent productions is at the heart of the PlayStation maker's next-gen plan

Rarely has a videogame executive enjoyed such an honest moment of joy on stage as **Jack Tretton**, president and CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment America. He delivered the news at E3 that PlayStation 4 will permit used game sales and retail for $100 less than its rival, Xbox One. This sucker punch was aimed at Microsoft's hardware plans, but it was when Sony called a clutch of indie game makers to the Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena stage that the publisher started a fight on the software front. "We absolutely love scouring the Earth for inspirational indie developers," said **Adam Boyes**, VP of thirdparty relations at SCE, while the eight creators played their games in a semi-circle of giant screens, front and centre of Sony's next-generation presentation. "We're developing the world's best indie game portfolio across all the PlayStation platforms, and giving developers the ability to self-publish their games."

This commitment to the independent game development scene is arguably in Sony's DNA. Following the launch of the original PlayStation in Japan, Sony ran numerous programs to aid startup Japanese development studios. Many professional developers cut their teeth on Sony's Net Yaroze consumer development kit for PlayStation, and the company has continued to invest in new talent with ongoing student competitions and its so-called 'pub fund' for original independent IP such as 2012's *Dyad*. But that support has traditionally taken place backstage; Sony's bold, brash pledge to indies was on parade at E3. So does this showboating represent a true sharpening of commitment, or is indie support merely another tick on the company's marketing plan?

"We've been fairly indie-friendly for a while now on paper, allowing self-publishing on PSN for more than five years," says **Nick Suttner**, account support manager at Sony Computer Entertainment America, who describes his job as 'helping cool indie games come to PlayStation platforms'.



The figurehead for PS4's indie drive is Jonathan Blow's *The Witness*, shown off at the console's announcement and surrounded by the sort of fanfare usually associated with big-budget productions





Jack Tretton (top), president and CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment America. Adam Boyes (above), vice president of thirdparty relations at SCE

"In the beginning, we did a pretty poor job at explaining this, so we've spent the last 18 months putting the message out there that we're a very open, easy platform holder to work with. At the same time, we've examined the process through the eyes of an indie, eliminating every roadblock and fee that we can along the way. The indie PSN content and announcements you've seen so far this year are a direct reflection of those efforts. We've discovered the big secret behind indies wanting to work with you is this: don't be jerks."

Shahid Ahmad runs the strategic content team at Sony's London offices, a group dedicated to finding new games and talent for PS Vita. This small team has been responsible for signing big-hitting indie games such as *Hotline Miami*, *Super Crate Box*, *Velocity Ultra* and *Spelunky*. While Ahmad agrees that the fragmentation of larger development studios has placed a greater need on publishers to engage with indies, he denies that this is a new stance for Sony. "We are the platform that brought you everything from *Vib-Ribbon* to *Journey*," he says. "That's PlayStation. We've always done that. We have always engaged with a wide variety of partners, but since the potential partner space has exploded, and since indies are making some of the most interesting content, we think there's tremendous benefit to the whole ecosystem if we work out better ways of engaging with them. So we try to act as the advocate of our customers and, while trying to please them, we always try to push the needle a little further so that new forms can be encouraged and flower."

Suttner agrees that an injection of indie talent is critical to maintaining a healthy and balanced ecosystem. "It's a benefit to both Sony and gamers to make our platforms an easy place to bring rad games to. Without indies, the breadth of creativity and innovation on PSN would shrink drastically, and that's really important to the culture of PlayStation – you see it all the time in our firstparty titles such as *Journey* and *Hohokum* – and fostering that creative spirit on a wider platform level can only help us. It's a mutually beneficial relationship between Sony and indies, with players reaping the rewards. Everyone wins."



***Hotline Miami* (above) is available now from the new Indie Games category of the PSN Store. SCE's Suttner picks *Hohokum* (below left) and *Journey* (below right) as exemplars of the company's investment in indies**





"We feel like kids in a sweetshop," Ahmad says. "Right now, we see probably the most dramatic rise in creativity the industry has seen since the early 1980s. New subgenres are being born. This is actually a tremendous opportunity not just to inject enormous creativity into our platforms, but also to offer a stable environment for our partners, be they indie or large, traditional publishers. A varied and interesting platform is better for everyone; for customers, for partners large and small – and for us."

Mike Bithell is creator of the BAFTA award-winning *Thomas Was Alone*, a game that recently made its debut on PSN. For Bithell, Sony's indie support is more than mere rhetoric. "As a platform holder, they get it," he says. "They're working to strip away the barriers for indies to get on to their system. People think the biggest block to getting onto console is a secret handshake or some coding voodoo, but the biggest challenge is bureaucracy. The strategic development team at Sony seems to get this, and does everything it can to help people like me get our games out."

Without this elimination of barriers to indie publishing on consoles, indie developers might reasonably opt for the largely friction-free PC as their lead platform. But for Bithell, releasing on PSN has brought his game to a far wider audience, proving that having a presence on mainstream consoles is not only worthwhile but also a key aspect to successful business as an indie. "Before launching *Thomas Was Alone* on Vita and PS3, I assumed a gamer was a gamer was a gamer. It's easy to do if you're a developer. I own every console, but that's not most players. Even though the game was well known at this point among PC gamers it was unheard of on console, and we had to start from nothing, marketing-wise. These are





Nick Suttner (top) is an account support manager at SCEA. Mike Bithell (above) is the creator of *Thomas Was Alone*

different audiences, and that was reflected in the sales. There's no cannibalisation; the arc is very similar. If you're not on consoles, you're depriving a whole audience of your work and, less nobly, you're depriving yourself of the money they'd happily spend."

Discoverability is a key issue on both PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, with many indie devs feeling that their games haven't been given sufficient profile on each console's respective store. The risk with opening the doors to self-publishing on PlayStation 4 is the signal-to-noise ratio brought about by the glut of content for consumers to wade through, an ongoing problem on Apple's App Store and Steam's Greenlight program.

For Suttner, working with Sony doesn't mean that indie devs can ignore the pressing need to market their game. That responsibility principally rests with the studio, no matter how much support a platform holder offers them. "PR in particular is a pretty important thing to indies, and you really need to find time to do it – or find money to pay someone else to," he says. "With so many games and so many platforms competing for everyone's time, indies need to find the line of communication to their potential audience. Nothing is sadder than a game someone spent five years working on not finding an audience because the developer didn't spend any of that time getting people excited about it."

> "I think indies are moving to Sony's platforms for one simple reason: because they asked us"

Suttner's work has supported titles such as *Guacamelee!* and *Sportsfriends*, and for him the lines between indie and mainstream games are dissipating. "The fact you're independent doesn't really mean much, in the best possible way – you'll be featured on our digital storefronts alongside everything else, as has been the case for a while. I think what indie games will really accomplish in terms of affecting the mainstream, both developers and gamers, is showing that there's an audience for an infinite range of human experiences and that games can be about love, or loss, or luchadores."

If every new generation of competing console hardware is framed as a war, then, with regard to support of indies, Sony has taken a great deal of ground from Microsoft recently. That company has recently sought to address the perception that, by refusing developers the opportunity to self-publish on Xbox One and emphasising a close relationship with the middleware company Unity, it's anti-indie – and reversing opinion will take a great deal of effort. "Forcing a publisher on indies, especially established indies with experience of handling larger projects, makes little sense," says Bithell. "It's frustrating on a creative level, and it means less money to developers. By fostering direct relationships with indies like me, Sony is making it difficult *not* to release on their platform."

The value of those relationships appears critical in inspiring indie devs to work alongside Sony where releasing a new title remains more complicated than self-publishing on PC. "I think indies are moving to Sony's platforms for one simple reason: because they asked us," Bithell says. "It's that simple, really. Sony has reached out to a tonne of developers, and they've not stopped announcing new devs coming to their platforms. They also listen to us: the most common question I'm asked on visits to Sony is: 'What's cool? What's about to be awesome?' They're checking out half-finished games by unproven devs, and that's amazing. This proactive approach gives them an edge."

Indeed, the perception is that Sony is an avid supporter of new, potentially unrefined talent. "Our biggest success by far has been getting the industry – including press, but particularly the indie community – so firmly behind PlayStation," says Ahmad. "It gave us extraordinary momentum going into E3. The excitement was palpable. A year ago, I wanted the best version of a game to be on Vita. This year, I'm hearing people say 'it's best on Vita'. If anything is a success, it's that." ■

NET YAROZE
Sony first reached out to independent developers way back in 1997 with the Net Yaroze PlayStation development kit. The fetching black PS1 cost $750 and required a PC to write and compile code but the costly investment paid off for a number of developers. Yaroze-made games were distributed on the Official (UK) PlayStation Magazine's cover disc as early as December '97, and many of Yaroze's bedroom coders would later find jobs in the industry, including *Terra-Incognita*-developer-turned Square-Enix-director Mitsuru Kamiyama.





From your perspective, what's the difference between triple-A and independent games' creative processes?
There are benefits to both approaches. A triple-A developer will be able to parallelise the entire process to allow for dramatic scale, potentially causing a slight dilution in singular vision or creative ambition. By contrast, an indie dev will have to do everything and sometimes, but not always, take longer to do it. What they sacrifice in dramatic scale, they gain in creative ambition and focus.

What can indie developers teach blockbuster studios?
Independent developers often demonstrate that you don't need a design document to make an incredible game. You simply need the germ of an idea that makes total sense as a singular entity, and you need to iterate on the control and the mechanics and the difficulty curve and the feedback and the balance to sustain flow. They show that you can make a game in two days, that it's OK to throw work away and focus only on what's working. Then again, of course, a great many triple-A developers know this already.

What can blockbuster studios teach indie developers?
Portable, maintainable, bug-free, highly optimised code is crucial to the pipeline and process, as is excellent tool-chain construction and asset management. Blockbuster games demonstrate what's possible when you strive for excellence in every technical area. Then again, a great many indie developers know this already.



Rise of the Ancients

The advance of the multiplayer online battle arena has turned into an assault. What happens next?

They may have a name so nebulous as to practically duck definition, but you'll know one when you see one. MOBAs – multiplayer online battle arenas – are a peculiarity: a genre anecdotal evidence suggests many are daunted to try, but that nonetheless commands a larger userbase than any of the recent *Call of Duties* on 360, PS3 and PC combined.

'MOBA' defines a subset of strategy games born from mods of Blizzard games *Warcraft III* and *StarCraft*, in which two teams of five face off on a near-symmetrical map. The subset has a few extra traditions: the map is split into lanes; players control heroes; armies of AI 'creeps' are produced without player input; and both teams have access to a 'jungle' area full of NPC enemies to be harvested for gold and experience points.

The subset is growing at a staggering pace, outgrowing their realtime strategy roots and boasting user numbers that leave all games, in all genres on all platforms, in their wake. *League Of Legends* boasts more than 35 million players, with a peak concurrent player base of more than 5 million. Steam's player base – that is, all of Steam, with its two-thousand-odd game catalogue – only just tips that figure.

Dota 2, Valve's own updated version of Defense Of The Ancients – itself the blueprint for modern MOBAs – looks set to ape *LOL*'s success. In its final days of invite-only beta testing the game was already the most played among Steam's catalogue, with four times the players of second-place *Team Fortress 2*. Both games use a free-to-play model, with *LOL* unlocking each of its 100-plus heroes for a week at a time and charging a few pounds to keep them for regular play, while *Dota 2* emphasises cosmetic enhancements for its heroes. When the player base is so vast, if only a small percentage of players pay it makes for a vast monetary return for developers.

League Of Legends boasts more than 35m players, with a peak concurrent player base of more than 5m

In an often-cynical industry, this return on investment is driving the development of the next generation of MOBAs. This year's E3 was thick with the genre, with each iteration boasting only slight mechanical differentiation but a dramatic selection of themes. EA's *Dawngate* aims to go back to what systems designer Alex Hutu describes as the "RTS roots of MOBAs", introducing 'economy nodes' for capture. The Creative Assembly announced *Total War Arena*, a ten-vs-ten multiplayer game that sounds markedly MOBA-ish. *Sins Of A Dark Age* is a PvP MOBA-like from Ironclad Games, creator of space RTS *Sins Of A Solar Empire*. And the Warner Bros game *Infinite Crisis* is a MOBA set in the DC Comics universe, developed by MMORPG specialist Turbine.

But why the rush to chase *League Of Legends*, after so many aped *World Of Warcraft* and tripped into failure and bankruptcy? For starters they're comparatively cheap to develop and run, requiring only balance tweaks and occasional new heroes as opposed to whole new maps, dialogue or quests. They offer exceptional value to players, too. The first wave of free-to-play titles tended to be eastern MMORPGs with exploitative and grind-focused game mechanics but recent western games have proved that free-to-play can be fair for even the most competitive players. The original DOTA is arcane, nuanced and staggeringly deep – traits that have remained in its spiritual successors and make MOBAs a tremendous amount of gaming for zero initial outlay.

The free-to-play model opens MOBAs up to countries and communities lacking the retail infrastructure to shift boxed copies, or those built around a cafe culture that emphasises remote accounts over game ownership. Certainly *LOL* and *Dota 2* have seen huge success in South Korea and China, and both games' pro gaming scenes are dominated by Asian nations. Adoption in new markets outside the US and Europe has been integral to *League Of Legends*' wild success, and although its monstrous player base suggests most MOBA players have picked their title and stuck with it, that a developer as sage as Valve has thrown its microtransaction-funded hat into the ring suggests the MOBA still has room to grow – certainly more so than previous development fads, such as fighting games and MMORPGs.

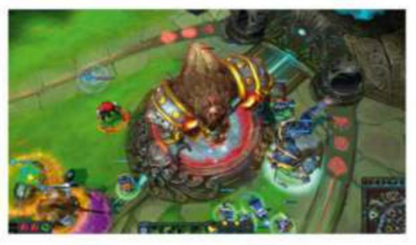
Thanks to *LOL*, Riot has a bankroll that could keep it in business through many a flop. *Dota 2*, a near-perfect copy of the original DOTA, has lured in millions of players since the original's release in 2005. Those loyal multitudes haven't gone anywhere in the past eight years, so it's hard to imagine they'll stray far in the next eight. *Batman*-branded competitors and new titles may only manage to nip at the flanks of these two MOBA giants, and some will fall along the way, but their investment is sensible – play it right and they'll still get a share of gaming's newest, largest community. ■

MOBAS AND SHAKERS

***Warcraft III's* Defense Of The Ancients mod is the MOBA archetype. Games such as *League Of Legends* and *Heroes of Newerth* follow it fairly slavishly, albeit with the kind of granular changes that those games' fans would trade blows over. Other games have deviated from the programme. *SMITE* and *Super Monday Night Combat* take the concept and frame it with a ground-level camera. Particularly interesting are the attempts to shift the genre to console: *Awesomenauts* simplifies complicated controls and hero interactions in 2D; *Guardians Of Middle Earth* attempts something more traditional that winds up looking muddy and feeling sluggish without access to a mouse's precision. It's difficult to see the MOBA exploding in popularity on console, partly because both Sony and Microsoft are novices when it comes to free-to-play, and partly because console hardware excludes the emerging gaming markets where the MOBA is strongest.**







Compared with its contemporaries, ***Total War Arena*** **(left) is a dramatic twist on the usual MOBA rules, but it remains deeply rooted in the genre DOTA spawned**







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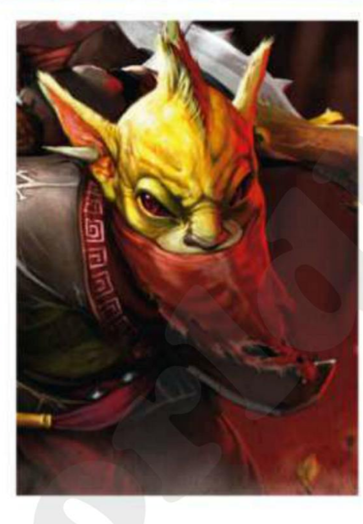
Why high-profile failures can't stop the march of the MOBA



Even well-established developers have suffered while chasing *League Of Legends*' success. In November, Petroglyph overhauled its 2011 game *Rise Of The Immortals* to turn it into the MOBA *Battle For Graxia*, but lacking the player count to maintain the game's infrastructure, it closed in June. However, Graxia's story hasn't deterred others from taking a shot at *LOL*, and the use of powerful brands – DOTA, DC, *Total War* – may be a strong lure for players who have yet to experience the genre. That so many competitive online gamers can't even define what a MOBA is leaves countless avenues for expansion for future *LOL*-alikes.



MOBAs have the depth and complexity to deter more casual players, and a wrong turn for the genre could easily see it disappearing into the same ghetto fighting games disappeared into – but for now, forthcoming MOBAs aren't necessarily deepening the *LOL* experience, just rebranding it



A revolution on hold

The Android-powered Ouya launches worldwide but struggles to meet its $8.5 million promise

Visit the ghost of Ouya's Kickstarter page and you'll see its audacious mission statement: "It's time to upend console gaming". Below the bolded goal sits another eye-catching aim: "All games free to play". But in the wake of its global rollout, Ouya has much to do before it meets backers' and buyers' expectations.

As promised, every game on Ouya does have some form of free component. However, the ways in which the console's development partners have interpreted the core free-to-test tenet are damaging, with prices that vary from fair to misguided to those built on deceitful foundations.

Instead of a shopfront, Ouya's Discover portal means buyers download games without any information about what they're getting beyond a brief synopsis. Some games are totally free, others have a fixed price unlock, some – such as *Hidden In Plain Sight* – operate a pay-what-you-want unlock price point, and all games with premium components experiment with different methods. *Canabalt HD*, for instance, offers five lives per day for free, with unlimited gaming unlocked for a fee – and it clearly advertises its structure from the beginning. Not every game is as generous. Titles such as *The Ball* offer no mention of payment until they hit you with paywalls during the game.

Nobody expected developers to make their Ouya games for free, but the courtesy of informing gamers about their downloads – whether they're demos or timed or full games – should have been a non-negotiable feature. The game library feels littered with honeytrap ventures:



every download a mystery, every surprise paywall adding to the feeling that Ouya is just a £99 demo box.

Tangled truths are a problem dogging all aspects of the machine. External peripheral support works on a game-by-game basis with no indication given on either side; the Discover tab is a confused jumble of tiles where genre categories are more of a suggestion than a filing system; and questionable controller build quality is matched by questionable controller implementation, where few challenges are greater than trying to figure out how to invert the sticks.

> Some titles offer no mention of payment until they hit you with paywalls during the game

Ouya has the potential to be much more than it currently is. It's looking to make devices such as Roku and even Apple TV extinct once apps like XBMC and Netflix are optimised and available for the device, but with countless Android-based competitors due soon, Ouya can't afford to wait long. This month sees the release of PlayJam's cheaper and more portable GameStick, with XBMC support out of the box and popular streaming services not far behind. The upcoming subscription-based GamePop and GamePop Mini, meanwhile, are aiming to capitalise on Ouya's free-to-play communication errors by ensuring that all their games are free for as long as you pay a monthly console subscription.

Of all the Android machines going through their final phases of iteration, it's Mad Catz's Mojo, a console still without a price or release date, that looks poised to make the biggest challenge. In stark contrast to Ouya's closed shopfront, Mad Catz is promising access to Google Play and Amazon Appstore for an instantly available catalogue of thousands of titles, and the promise of your existing library of Android games accessible from the moment you turn it on. Despite Ouya's open-arms policy for developers, the console is closed to end users without the knowledge to side-load software.

Whether there's an appetite for any of these consoles remains to be seen. The wide range of Android devices without unified regulations has given rise to a minefield of titles unoptimised for different platforms, with buyers acting as bug-testers, and an unfriendly and prohibitive space for casual players lured by the promise of cheap and free games. Ouya's failure to meet even its most fundamental promises and its insistence on a closed Android system is a deflating discovery, and one that casts a worrying shadow over consoles with greater, more open-ended ambitions. ■

ROM TURN

While criticisms of the controller build and game selection have undoubtedly soured the console's launch, one of the biggest concerns for Ouya Inc is the potential mushroom cloud of legal challenges concerning the console's emulation support. Online retailer Game advertised SNES emulator SuperGNES as one of Ouya's major free apps in its first wave of promotion before pulling the ad. But a bigger piracy blunder came directly from Ouya's official Twitter feed, @playouya, which retweeted a picture of a user playing *Super Mario Bros* on the console and chipped in with the hashtag #freethegames.



DARK WORLD

The award-winning art behind Big Fish's Fetch

Brian Thompson's artwork for iOS adventure *Fetch* was among 16 pieces selected by the Academy Of Interactive Arts & Sciences for its tenth Into The Pixel showcase, placing the artwork alongside examples from *Destiny*, *StarCraft* and *Assassin's Creed*. "The game really honours the nostalgia of youth and the fun of adventure," Thompson says. "For this particular piece, Dark Ages, I'm paying homage to the Disney artist Eyvind Earle who created the style for Disney's Sleeping Beauty. The scene is painted to look like it was built as a backdrop, complete with spotlights, gears and scaffolding." After its inclusion in Into The Pixel, Dark Ages will be featured in the book Spectrum 20: The Best In Contemporary Fantastic Art, available November 12.



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"It felt a lot like high school.

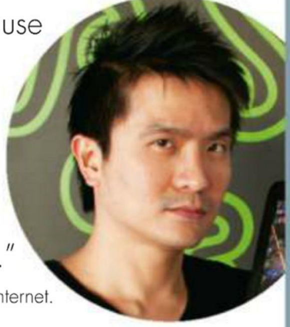
There are popular kids, then there are the troublemakers... The troublemakers are the ones trying to make a difference."

An alternative view of Valve's mythical structure, from former head of hardware **Jeri Ellsworth**.

"We don't make PlayStation accessories because

I don't really spend time with mine.

I design stuff I actually want as a gamer."



Razer founder **Min-Liang Tan** walks his own path and enrages half the Internet.



"[Wii U's online numbers] are so small

it's hardly worth running the servers.

The Wii U feels like an offline experience right now."

EA's **Peter Moore** explains why EA won't be a regular fixture on Nintendo's console.

"There's no point in a solution that does not match the market. Japan is difficult.

I'm almost tempted to ask for ideas."

Japanese Xbox boss **Yasuyuki Higuchi** can't find a way to sell Microsoft's NFL deal to Japan.

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Dead Or Alive 5 Ultimate
Manufacturer Tecmo Koei, Team Ninja, Sega

Tecmo isn't nearly as famous for its coin-ops as Capcom, Sega or Namco, but the Tokyo company was a presence in arcades from 1985 to 2001. Titles such as *Silkworm, Shadow Warriors, Dead Or Alive* and the popular *Tecmo Bowl* series swallowed quarters and 20ps across the western world, but Tecmo left the arcade scene back in 2001 with almost-unknown platformer *Monster Farm Jump*. Its most recent notable release was *Dead Or Alive 2* in 1999, and it's with *Dead Or Alive* that it's returning to Japanese arcades this winter.

Dead Or Alive 5 Ultimate is Tecmo's first arcade game in 12 years and will arrive in arcades via an unconventional route courtesy of Sega, which will handle the game's distribution via its unpronounceable ALL.Net P-ras MULTI Ver. 2 digital distribution service. Already well-tested by *Phantom Breaker, Under Defeat HD* and *Guilty Gear XX Accent Core Plus R*, ALL.Net allows Sega to distribute titles to Sega RingEdge cabinets in over 900 Japanese arcades, each supporting multiple games with a user-controlled game selection menu without cutting into arcade owners' precious square footage.

Dead Or Alive 5 is a testbed for a number of Tecmo Koei's upcoming experiments. Already there's a handheld version on Vita, and the free-to-play *Dead Or Alive 5 Ultimate: Core Fighters* will be downloadable on PS3 alongside *Ultimate*'s complete boxed version for PS3 and 360 on September 3. A few months later Sega will bring *Dead Or Alive* back to arcades, and combined they represent the future of the fighting genre – free-to-play for more casual types, boxed copies for dedicated players in the western market where online play is king, and arcade versions for fighting gamers across Japan.

My Favourite Game
Max Landis

Chronicle's screenwriter on loathing Duck Hunt's dog and starting shit in Colonial America for no reason

Screenwriter **Max Landis** is the writer of sleeper-hit superhero movie Chronicle and now has 14 projects in the pipeline. As the son of John Landis, director of An American Werewolf In London, Max may have the silver screen in his blood, but games have been a presence throughout his life, if sometimes only as pieces on his bedroom floor.

What's your earliest gaming memory?
My uncle had *Duck Hunt*. It was the first videogame I ever played and the most frustrating thing I'd experienced, because as a first-world child you're not put in a position to be defeated. Everything is fair, everything turns out OK. Well, guess what? In *Duck Hunt*, things don't turn out OK. The dog is laughing at you. I just remember feeling such animosity and hatred towards that dog in a way I'd never experienced before.

Did games play a big part in your life?
They did and they didn't, because I was such a behaviourally challenged kid that I smashed the first Nintendo given to me with my fists. The next system I was given was a 3DO, which is the most ridiculous gaming console. It was huge and had a bunch of terrible games, and also an amazing game called *Gex*. I also eventually smashed the 3DO.

Have you ever been approached to write for videogames?
Not once. It's hard to break into the videogame business. I've tried several times to pitch videogames, but they're so [exclusive]. Maybe a few more movies down the line, when I'm a bit more influential, people will come to me. But as of right now, they'd rather be writing their own stuff.

SCRIPTING THE FUTURE
Max Landis sold his first script – a collaboration with his father on a Masters Of Horror episode – when he was 18. After leaving university, Landis began writing speculative scripts. Chronicle was the first of his motion-picture screenplays to be made, helmed by future Shadow Of The Colossus director Josh Trank. In 2001, Landis was listed in Forbes' '30 Under 30' to watch in the entertainment industry. His scripts for Good Time Gang and a project based on Frankenstein are now in preproduction.



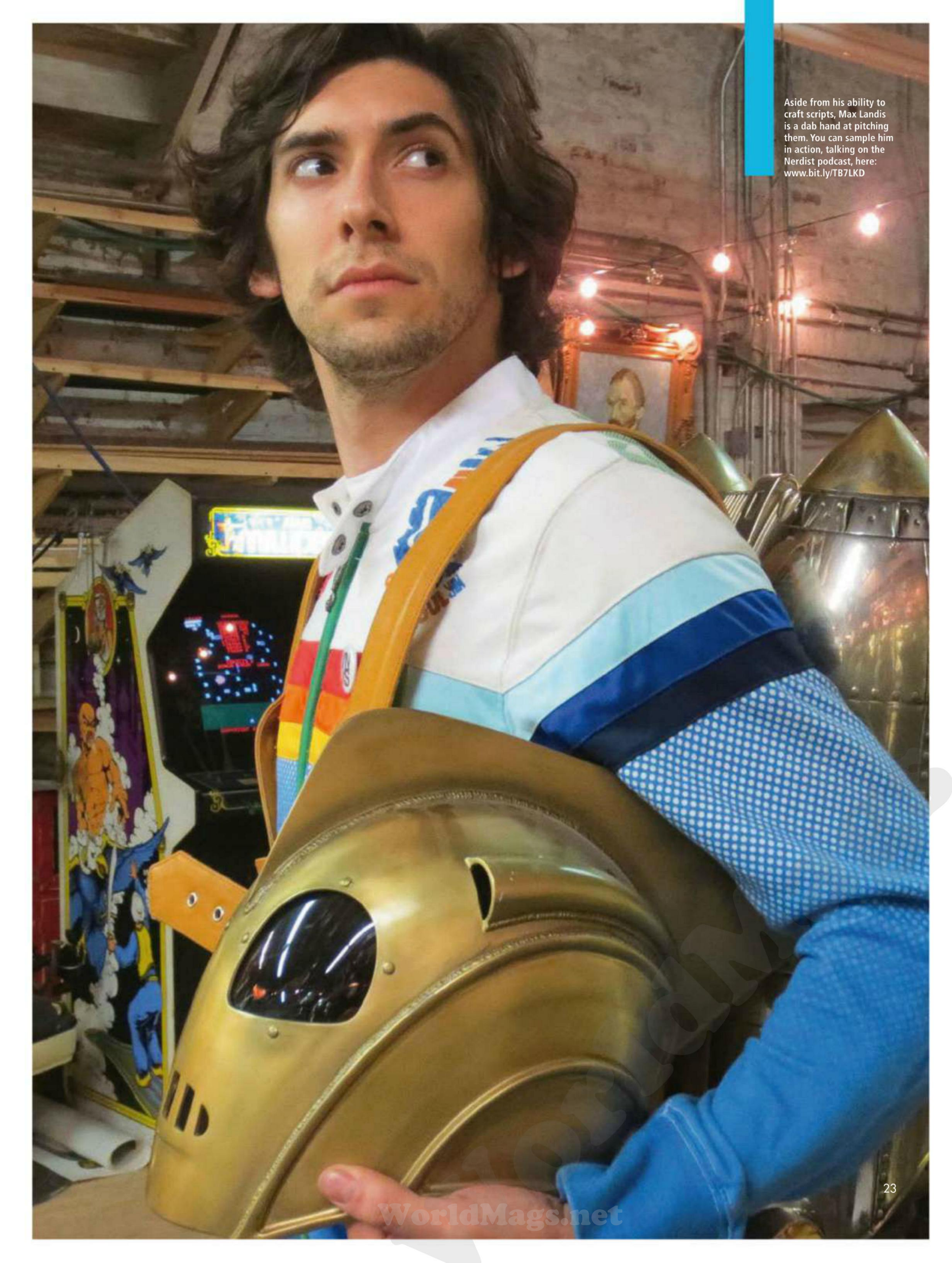
How do you think videogames compare with films as a storytelling medium?
They stand head and shoulders above them. We've reached a place – just in terms of technology – where even what a videogame is, to me, is blurry. Is Twitter a videogame? When you get retweeted and favourited, it's the same sort of dopamine reward as beating a level in a videogame. And is Facebook a videogame? There are likes and wall posts and events. And when a bunch of people sign up for an event, it feels really good, almost like you're playing a videogame, but mixed into your real life. I feel like there are aspects of videogames in everything.

"Is Twitter a videogame? When you get retweeted and favourited, it's the same sort of dopamine reward"

Do games get in the way of your work?
Nothing gets in the way of my work, because the way I write is based around how much I enjoy writing, so it's hard for me to be distracted when I want to do it. That said, these days I play more videogames than I ever have, and I think that's true of most people in my generation. Because as we grew up, instead of growing out of them in the way you grow out of action figures, games grew up with us. They turned into intense narrative stories and visually beautiful sagas that have you running through Colonial America, or riding a horse through the Old West, or flying through space. And, also, there's that very human thing where you do things out of pattern. I beat *Assassin's Creed III* months ago and I'm still running around, just starting shit in Colonial America for no reason.

Do you see the desire of certain videogames to become increasingly cinematic as a good thing?
We'll see. There's a moment in the latest *Call Of Duty* where you're lying on a ship, you can't move, you can't see anything, and it's like, "Why the fuck am I even playing this game?" It's not fun. So at the end of the day I guess no, I think it's a bad thing games are becoming cinematic, because I think they should be more immersive than cinematic. Cinema is being told a story, and videogames are telling a story.

The big question, then: what's your favourite game?
The videogame I've played the most is *SmackDown Vs Raw 2011*, because I love wrestling and I love character design. The best experience I've had playing a game is *Spec Ops: The Line*, because it's really smart and fun. What's interesting is that it's so directly a satire of *Call Of Duty* – saying, 'Oh, you have fun shooting all these people? Well, maybe you should fucking think about it!' It's wonderful. I love that the loading screens start off giving you tips and turn hallucinatory. Every part of the game gets into it. It's really brave. ■



Aside from his ability to craft scripts, Max Landis is a dab hand at pitching them. You can sample him in action, talking on the Nerdist podcast, here: www.bit.ly/TB7LKD

WEBSITE
Display Lag
www.displaylag.com
Input latency is the HD era's dirty secret, something traditionally overlooked in the purchasing process by people obsessing over RGB balance and black levels. To game players, it might just be the most important factor when seeking out a new display: just a few frames of delay between a button press and the resulting action can turn a responsive game into a sludgy mess. Games where timing is key are the most affected, so it's little surprise that Display Lag is the brainchild of competitive *Street Fighter* player Adeel 'Four Wude' Soomro. With a list of almost 200 displays that's growing by the day, Soomro is building what should be an essential resource for those buying a new TV. One drawback is that we'll no longer be able to blame our many dropped combos on a laggy display.



VIDEO
***Half-Life 2* speedrun**
bit.ly/129X4Ddc
Pushing theoretical physics and Valve's Source engine to the limit, the Sourcerers team turn Gordon Freeman into a human missile, finishing *Half-Life 2* in under 90 minutes by exploiting every glitch, shortcut and even Valve's own anti-bunny-hopping measures in extraordinarily creative ways. AI pathing is broken by bonking NPCs on the head, entire levels are skipped by jumping the map in a single bound, and lots of time is spent staring at Alyx's behind and simulating firstperson sex with sticks. Was that last one *really* necessary?

WEB GAME
Time Travel Knight
bit.ly/1dl7JfU
Last year's Molyjam was based on the musings of spoof Twitter account Peter Molydeux; this year's event looked to the genuine article for inspiration. Colombian team Glitchy Pixel's chosen Peter Molyneux quote was: "I wish I had some time machine and could go back two weeks. You live by your mistakes, for sure." You play as a knight who is the only survivor of a cataclysmic event. A time machine sends you back 14 days so you can avert the apocalypse. Cue a top-down dash through a pixel-art kingdom in which you slash skeletons for coins, buy items from merchants, and feed starving dragons before going to see your king. You'll need a few playthroughs to get everything done in time, but this is remarkably coherent for something produced in Molyjam's 48-hour limit.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

An agglomeration of items that caught our attention during the production of **E**257

CONTROLLER
Omni
With Oculus Rift sparking the rebirth of the VR headset and instantly cornering the market, those who want to successfully hitch a ride on the virtual bandwagon have to take a different tack. Enter Omni, a VR treadmill whose bowl-shaped device has a low-friction grooved surface; studded footwear ensures the player's feet don't go sliding from left to right. The prospect of a morning jog in *Skyrim* is oddly appealing, and Omni's potential extends far beyond videogames, but there are concerns. Price will be a factor and durability will be key, but perhaps the biggest potential stumbling block will be embarrassment. We assume that those who've pledged on Kickstarter don't play games in their living rooms.



continue

China
Allowing foreign console sales? Great news for platform holders

The Steam Summer Sale
Our game wishlists were ready…

Nintendo's new IP
Something new from Miyamoto is just what Wii U needs

Animal Crossing
We can't make it to the pub – we need to meet a goat about a sofa

quit

China
Next up: grey market console knockoffs. And all the human rights stuff

The Steam Summer Sale
…but sadly our bank accounts weren't

Wii Vitality Sensor
Nintendo couldn't find enough uses for it, so it's been shelved

Xbox One at EVO
Applause for *Killer Instinct* but boos for Xbox One



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TWEETS

The Cave is 75% off right now on Steam, which means they pay you to buy it! Fair warning: I suck at math.
Ron Gilbert @grumpygamer8h
Game developer

Most devs I know would not design F2P games by choice. They do it because they are being forced to, via economics. Blame gamers :)
George Broussard @georgeb3dr12h
Duke Nukem *creator*

Citizen Kane? I'd be satisfied with the Police Academy of games.
GiordanoContestabile @giordanobc5m
PopCap exec turned angel investor

Ah yes, the Steam Summer Sale – where I attempt to buy a game because it's on sale but then find out I already own it.
Matt Rix @MattRix15h
Trainyard *creator*



DISPATCHES SEPTEMBER

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers pitch an Aliens game without guns, question the future of open-world games and debate our PS4 endorsement. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** questions why smartphone rivalries feel so much less contentious than the Sony-Microsoft console war; **Leigh Alexander** picks apart the suggestion that prizing diversity promotes gimmickry and dilution of challenge; and **Brian Howe** does some investigative reporting, peeling back the pearly-toothed, smiling veneer of 'real' families promoting game hardware.



www.edge-online.com
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 256

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Letter of the month wins a PS Vita

Feeble fantasy

Like all artistic mediums, 'can't' is a word that should never be in the vocabulary of videogame design. It has long been recognised that, for such limitless scope, we find ourselves with remakes of remakes and copied designs. Here I take issue with Steven Poole's Trigger Happy column (**E**256). I completely agree that an Aliens game should not be a shoot 'em up. However, I disagree that you can't make a videogame of Aliens. If anything, the Aliens franchise is perfectly suited to proving to publishers that shooting galleries are not the only kind of game that can succeed.

I draw my example from *Amnesia*, which is one of those rare firstperson games where you are powerless in the face of your enemies. Stare at a monster for too long and they'll notice you and run at you, leading you to sprint in full panic in the opposite direction, eventually diving behind a barrel and praying, terrified, that 'it' won't find you. You spend 99 per cent of the game on edge.

If 'Aliens the videogame' took a similar approach then it would undoubtedly prove wildly successful. You live and breathe the character, and like in true horrors, you are no superhero. With the 'beep beep' of the motion tracker driving you to insanity, you stumble your way through the game where you are the victim, the hunted. No flashy cutscenes, no button prompts. A game about fear and survival. You would effectively be inside the classic Aliens film. I would buy such a game in an instant, and I would like to think I wouldn't be the only one.
Michael Entwistle

Good point. We've all heard it suggested that people flock to games for the power fantasy, but some of the most resonant game design in recent years – *Dark Souls*, *Spelunky*, etc – exploits the emotional impact of feeling vulnerable. A fully *Spelunky*-compatible PS Vita is on its way.

Don't bury the Xbone

My first reaction to issue 256's cover was, "Wow, that's going to get them a lot of angry emails". My second was that, no, it probably wasn't. After such a disastrous reveal, Microsoft probably has a lot more apologists than enthusiasts at the moment. But it's still jarring. Such a statement – that the PS4 is the only option – can't help but rub me up the wrong way.

The article in the magazine itself is a bit more level-headed and raises a lot of good points. But you guys are still too certain of things; making such a bold statement is hugely problematic at this point – even if you state "right now". Sony has taken advantage of Microsoft's blunder brilliantly, but I don't think it's out of any deep change in their policies. They've shown time and again that they can take away features without any consideration for customers.

And the Xbone still has the integrated Kinect, which is kind of a wildcard at the moment. As horrible as its current incarnation is, it also has *Happy Action Theater*, which has given my toddler and his friends more joy than all the other games he plays combined (with the possible exception of *Rayman Legends*). With more horsepower and developers knowing it will be installed on all systems, the Kinect is a potential killer app – I'm drooling at the thought of controlling, say, a *Command & Conquer* game with well-implemented verbal commands and *Minority Report*-style hand gestures.

Right now, sure, I'd take the PS4 over Xbox One out of principle. But all we have at this point is words. Hype. Bullshit. And speaking of things we actually have, the only option right now is the PC. You can purchase a fairly beefy computer for only slightly more than the Xbox One, and it will outperform any of the next-gen platforms. Console exclusivity will become less and less of a problem as development costs become larger, and studios try to maximise returns. PC games are cheaper. And do you know which console I find most tempting, after the PC? The Wii U. Because it provides the sort of experience, and the kinds of games, I wouldn't be able to get on the PC.

By the time I feel the need to get another console, enough time will have elapsed that I can make an informed decision on whether I'd want to give my money to Sony or Microsoft. Oh, I'm fairly sure I'd end up going for a PS4. But the only option? No, seriously, guys, it isn't.
Rodrigo Citon

Microsoft has been predictably aggressive with its exclusives, and anyone who loves games will want to own both platforms eventually. We stand by the assertion, though: today, PS4 is our console pick.

The big wide world

The big thing that next-gen appears to be bringing as a standard is 'open world'. *Watch Dogs, Destiny, The Crew, The Division* and *Castlevania* are new entries to the concept, while titles like *MGS, Mirror's Edge 2, Dragon Age* and *The Witcher* will be embracing the ecosystem. Then there are the usual suspects who will be building on previous 'open world' experiences such as *GTA, Assassins Creed, Elder Scrolls, Far Cry*, et al.

I can understand the trepidation of a lot of gamers regarding this development. On the surface this sounds like a great advancement, but as someone who has played a lot of these titles and had to sit through lots of loading screens, and see the same reused assets over half the world, it does fill me with some cynicism.

Part of why *Red Dead Redemption* and *Fallout 3* were well received is because

open world design fits their environments. While *Fallout 3* was very visceral, it was also rundown, decrepit and the same materials would be scavenged. The landscape would be grey and gritty. In the world of John Marston, small towns would be common with vast open wilderness. The environments were believable and therefore engaged the player and immersed them in the world. In contrast, entering another same-looking dungeon in *Skyrim* to fight more Draugr after spending 45 hours in-game was tiring. Apocalyptic worlds can still be full of colour, Bethesda – look at what Naughty Dog did with *The Last of Us,* for example!

I understand the difficulties for any developer creating an open world, and really do appreciate the technical limitations of the technology when having to reuse game assets. But this is where I think the problem lies – open world is not synonymous with vast landscape. I, and I feel many other players, would settle for smaller worlds that are more densely populated and have clearly different areas, with fewer reused assets.

Of course there is the selfish aspect to consumers expecting a huge amount of playtime from one title. There is a limitation to any game before it starts to feel the same. Dynamic events sound like they might alleviate some of the problem, but like 'street crimes' in *LA Noire* they will get samey. *Titanfall* and *Destiny* seem to have realised this and have adjusted their open worlds to include AI and human players. *The Division* also looks to have a very similar system, but we need to see how these pan out. These titles have a bit more wiggle room, being mostly focused on online-only play as well.

I'd like to see more innovative ideas introduced to singleplayer, where smaller landscapes and worlds are changed with events – such as earthquakes, tsunamis, terrorist attacks, etc. It would add a lot more longevity to the game. They could be the result of story or sidequest completion. Even better, they could be completely random and spawn a new set of objectives. Having world events like this allows the world to be 'terraformed', and therefore exploration could begin anew.

Before we do go bigger, let's use the extra horsepower available to enrich the open-world environments we have before creating more desolate and wearisome worlds. Let's get open worlds right, then take that formula to persistent worlds.
Daniel Dryhurst

As you suggest, even if next-gen hardware loosens the technical constraints associated with developing an open yet densely populated world, the broader design challenges are difficult to overcome. How do you facilitate play within that space? This issue's cover story (see p60) looks at some of the ways Bungie is going about it.


Daniel Dryhurst thinks 'open worlds' such as *Destiny*'s should be more highly populated before they get any bigger

Passing the timesink

I am sitting by a pool reading **Edge** on an iPad in Mallorca thinking of points raised in Dialogue and the editorial that have made me question my preorder of a PS4 over an Xbox One. And then the recollection comes to me like a bolt. I'm getting a PS4 for two reasons: my wife refuses to have a Kinect in the house, and all my friends are buying Xbox Ones. Let me say that again. EVERYONE I KNOW WHO PLAYS GAMES IS BUYING AN XBOX ONE. So I'm going to a platform that no one I know will be on. Why, you ask?

"You guys are too certain of things; making such a bold statement is problematic"

I spent hours playing games with my mates and it boiled down to one constant. *Call Of Duty: Black Ops, Modern Warfare 3* and *Black Ops 2*, with a brief flirtation with *Halo 4*. And this is the rub. I love the progression and the banter. But there are other games out there I want to play. But the rally cries of "*COD*, anyone?" or "Come on, just a quick one" are hard to resist.

There have been so many good games I've missed out on due to these watercooler experiences that I used to really enjoy. I could pretend to be offline but that just weakens the social aspects of online and does little to help.

So I've made a decision. I've gone with a Wii U for the family games, and the PS4 is just for me – in every sense of the word. And you know something? Since I stopped going on Xbox Live I have seen more people, played more games and finished more as well.
Paul Treacy

ONLINE OFFLINE

Join the discussion at www.facebook.com/edgeonline

Could indies inspire a 'renaissance of gaming' on PS4?

It'll take more than a bunch of pretentious indies to "save gaming".
Gaetan Massun

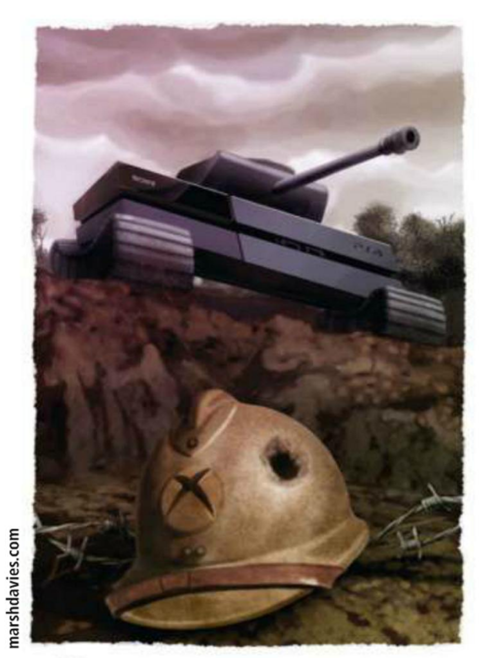
I wouldn't write off indies so quickly. Some of the most interesting ideas and games are coming from low budget, independent studios right now. Quite frankly, I'm so turned off by a lot of so-called triple-A experiences, because they all target the same audience. Very few have a hint of personality, never mind originality.
Jordan Khoviteri-Zadeh

Pretentious indies can indeed be great makers of games, even with their heads up their own arses – but those indies that strike gold (*Minecraft*) and make millions are what will save gaming.
Thomas C Jones

"Pretentious indies"? Pah. Ever played *Terraria*? It sold around two million copies and has a huge fanbase still. *Minecraft* started as an indie project too. Just a reminder.
Tomcat Cat Daniel's Matou

Look, if supporting the industry means I give up my rights then we should let the industry die. Sorry, developer, I respect what you do for me, but the issue is bigger than you – you just get caught in the crossfire.
Richard Cadman

Can't help thinking the role a publisher plays in tethering the devs/designers to business reality might have been helpful here. But then, who wants reality when you can have genius, if you're prepared to compromise a bit on how it's delivered?
Rob Hayden


marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

The console war seems to have been won before it's even started – but it could all have been different

The bellicose phrase "console wars" has been used since at least the 1990s for the competition between manufacturers of videogame machines. Right now, however, the warfare is looking unusually asymmetrical. I write this five months before the release of PS4 and Xbox One, and I don't remember there ever having been such a consensus as to the winner before launch. Sony has better specs. Developers, given a system architecture that wasn't designed as an ingenuity test by some alien civilisation, have fallen in love with Sony all over again. And the PS4 looks cooler: those snazzily angled slabs shout 'black ice sandwich of pure head-melting technology'.

All that, plus the PS4 will be cheaper. If this is a war, though, the model is not a years-long face off in the trenches, but instead Germany's mechanised penetration of the Maginot Line, resulting in the rapid collapse of France's defences.

Microsoft does have the USP of its HDMI input. My co-op shooter comrade-in-arms announced sarcastically that he was going to buy an Xbox One just so that he could plug his PS4 into it, and play only PS4 games through the Xbox interface. I'm not quite sure how this would stick it to The Man – after all, Microsoft would still get one more sale out of it – although if a console was capable of feeling humiliation, an Xbone used exclusively in this way would probably want the ground to open up and swallow it up.

I don't want to harsh poor Microsoft's buzz too much, though. It had a tough job to do, even before it had to perform that humiliating climbdown over the suspicious requirement for the console to phone home every day (I hope the PRISM guys at the NSA aren't too angry with them now) and those onerous plans for game DRM (which always means Digital Restrictions Management) – a climbdown that will forever be known, thanks to the insta-wit of the Internet hivemind, as the Xbox 180.

> Microsoft had a tough job to do, even before it had to perform that humiliating climbdown

They even had a difficult job with the console's name. The Xbox 360 had to be called that rather than Xbox 2 because it was going up against PlayStation 3, and 3 (as Nigel Tufnel from This Is Spinal Tap might say) is obviously one more than 2. Xbox 720 just wouldn't have made any sense. But Xbox One? It sounds as though they are trying to reboot the Xbox brand. Just like you have to reboot your Xbox 360 when it crashes.

And going all out with the 'own the living room' approach is brave, even if the way they are going about it is stupid. People are already accustomed to the interface and EPG of their current box from Freeview or Sky. No one wants to have to learn how to watch TV all over again – unless the payoff will be lots of extra new channels of reality TV sexual frottage and cooking shows teaching you how to prepare the latest fashionable snack, roasted guinea pig.

I ought to mention Nintendo: poor Nintendo. There you go.

Perhaps the general willingness to declare victory on behalf of Sony denotes a pervasive war fatigue among longterm videogame aficionados. Wouldn't it be simpler, after all, if there were just one console to buy?

At certain points in videogame history this has effectively been the case. During the first few years of the original PlayStation – when it had seen off the Saturn and before the first Xbox appeared on the market – it was the console that non-videogamers had heard about. 'PlayStation' became a generic term. The current pre-launch dominance of PS4 brings us closer to that state of affairs than at any other time since.

We usually think that more hardware manufacturers makes for a richer and more exciting ecosystem, driving experimentation and innovation in game design. But against that argument must be set convenience and comprehensibility to the general public – the ability to just buy 'the thing that plays videogames', just as you would buy a Blu-ray player without worrying about whether some Blu-rays will work on it or not.

If you squint a bit, you can even look at the boom in smartphone gaming in this way. Of course, lots of different manufacturers make smartphones, and there are four more-or-less major – and mostly incompatible – operating systems. But consider: hardly anyone chooses an iPhone or a Samsung or a Blackberry on the basis of what games are available for the system. They choose a phone they like the look and feel of, one whose marketing causes a pleasant warmth and perhaps a little moistness in the groin. Then, once they have the device in their pocket, they discover that it is also (as far as they are concerned) a generic videogames machine.

It's all so easy. All the games from the phone's marketplace just work on the phone. So the phone users just buy games, or play free games and become victims of the sorcery of in-app purchases. They don't have to bother with formats or platform-exclusive content, or wonder enviously whether the game runs better on someone else's phone. They can just enjoy and appreciate what they play. How relaxing! Maybe one day all videogaming will be like this.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net





marshdavies.com

LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Too many gamers think diversity means dumbing down. It's time to forget that outmoded view

Recently I sat on a panel at a games event where the organisers were discussing ways to attract more people to their festival, and lowering the intimidation barrier to make games culture more welcoming. The panellists talked about their experience with diversity initiatives and ways to spark non-gamer interest in playable exhibitions.

The conversation solicited feedback from the audience, and was mostly fruitful. But at one point a young man raised his hand and said he didn't like the idea of accessibility. He described how much less he would enjoy *Dark Souls* if it were friendlier. As he spoke, one of a row of men who'd had their arms crossed throughout shouted a supportive "woo!"

Of course, his point wasn't really relevant to the discussion, which wasn't about making hard games easy or diluting traditional videogames but about how to share a passion for games with others who may be less exposed to them or have preconceptions about them. Other participants tried to get the discussion back on track, but nearly every one of them preceded their statements with the reinforcement that they liked *Dark Souls*, they really did, but other people might find it too intimidating. It's as if they felt expressing a preference for easier, more welcoming games would somehow rob them of their credibility.

Now, I like *Dark Souls*, I really do. But that turn in the conversation crystallised some thoughts I've had since reading argumentative comments on articles I've written calling for more diversity in gaming. Oh my goodness, I thought: people associate accessibility and diversity with the 'dumbing down' of an entire medium. How did that happen?

I remember the mass exodus just a few years ago of traditional developers and experienced studio execs into the mobile and social space, which at its outset was highly focused on Facebook. These developers were entering a stage of life when marriage and family meant it no longer suited them to work the usual long hours. But more than that, they no longer had the time themselves to invest in the all-consuming 40-hour games they used to make.

The Facebook boom heralded an uncomfortable identity crisis in the developer community, coinciding with the rise of Zynga. Why take years of skill, experience and faith in the medium of design, and work on products designed to forcibly monetise consumers through friction and pinch points? It wasn't just the industry's moral unease with social game monetisation, though. It was hard to admire endless cartoonish requests for farm goods and not see the player as a bug-eyed bobblehead eager for White Mystery Eggs.

> The Facebook boom heralded an uncomfortable identity crisis in the developer community

Even though traditional houses like Electronic Arts bought into the Zynga-led ecosystem, the Facebook bubble has clearly since burst, validating a lot of those early concerns about the integrity and viability of that kind of game design. But while Facebook developers were still searching for a moral centre in their dubious work, many kept coming back to one common statement: they wanted to make games their mum would like, and isn't your mum a valid audience member?

The 'mum audience' became the flag around which Facebook developers tried to rally, and when problems emerged in the business and design of 'social' games, perhaps it's understandable that some gamers, leery of Facebook to begin with, began to associate 'appealing to women' with tacky design.

Remember the Wii launch conference? At the unveiling of Nintendo's family-friendly machine, fans were baffled by the lack of news on beloved brands in favour of the console as a health device. The pitch for a wider audience felt like a kind of betrayal to long-term gamers. It turns out that motion controllers had a fairly short-lived popularity arc, with limited long-term applications. Nintendo's struggle to convert Wii owners into Wii U owners seems to support the idea that a lot of new audiences bought a Wii but few developed a long-term relationship with games. Gamers stung by the notion that a game company would appeal to anyone outside their core culture now can point to the interest of 'outsiders' as fleeting, gimmicky and irrelevant.

Recent attempts to open up the gaming market to previously unreached players have resulted in disappointment – or at least what serious fans would call disappointment, since the pleasures of the Wii or *FarmVille* are hardly 'failures' just for their impermanence.

What is missing in the conversation is that both the Wii and Facebook are rich with learning experiences about enhancing the mass appeal of games. A handful of social brands still dominate mainstream play, like *Candy Crush Saga*, and it's too early to say that social gaming hasn't played a role in evolving the ways wider audiences can be reached.

But the simplification of the argument – a broader audience is somehow a stupider one – is a misconception that's constraining our efforts to welcome more diverse perspectives to game development and play. How will we show players and developers that being welcoming doesn't automatically lead to gimmicky games? That's the important challenge for the future.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media


marshdavies.com

BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

The happy gaming family in hardware ads is a myth, as the Galoresbys' tragic experience illuminates

There's only one thing that marketers of nontraditional game control systems seem certain of: middle-class families, their most coveted customers, still haven't a clue what their products are supposed to do. Early Wii test groups must have resembled the first encounters of primitive hominids with alien monoliths, and ended in Dad strangling Junior with a Nunchuk cable and Grandma howling at the rafters with a Sensor Bar lodged somewhere unspeakable. To head off such atrocities, Microsoft and Nintendo have deluged the Internet and TV with strikingly unironic adverts whereby actual lovely families, who were compensated for their time, demonstrate how to use Kinect and Wii U without it turning all Lord Of The Flies, 'spontaneously' spouting on-message dialogue. The ads are so trendy that Sony made one for something called PlayStation Move, which as far as we know doesn't exist. And, as a gaming publication, we'd probably have heard of it.

Attempting to boost middling sales after a lacklustre E3, Nintendo set to work on a desperate new ad campaign – a Hail Mary pass to the consumers who weren't buying Wii U because of the misconception that it was something other than a new console. Indeed, surveys showed that 83 per cent of the Wii U target demographic still thought it was either a fancy peripheral, a Japanese conceptual art project, or a government surveillance drone. More informed players now know Kinect is a surveillance drone, as reporters who waded deep into its EULA discovered. In any case, it seemed like a perfect opportunity to explore the first question that strikes anyone who sees these ads: "Where do they find these people?" We shadowed the Galoresby family from casting to final cut, setting out to report on a trend but stumbling on a family's downfall.

The Galoresbys are an American family of Caucasian extraction. Responding to Nintendo's open call for submissions, they sent in a video application of themselves convivially gaming, and were thrilled to be selected.

They were flown to Nintendo HQ, and ushered into a cosy living room set with sleek furniture and a window onto a perfectly manicured lawn. The Galoresbys had been told that they'd only have to play games on camera and say what they liked about the system. "We thought they chose us because we're a nice family," the father, Barry, said later, looking rueful in his cell. "But as soon as we got there, they started making changes."

First, the producer wanted to "tweak the optical diversity" of the cast. Nintendo had already pitched at white families, black families, and single-parent families, all with meagre results. In a last-ditch effort to blanket more demographics, he put the Galoresbys into mo-cap suits, which is why in the final version of the ad, Katie, the mother, appears to be Latin American; Barry looks South Asian; and Heather, the young daughter, is half Cherokee and half Chinese, as signalled by the feather in her headband and the erhu she was made to play theme music on. Most strangely of all, Ben, the Galoresbys' adopted Senegalese teenage son, is a white octogenarian in the ad. Even two-year-old Nathan gets mo-capped into Maniitok, a chubby Inuit baby in a fur onesie. "It seemed kind of offensive," Katie Galoresby later admitted, "but we were trying to raise money to match Ben's academic scholarship, so we went with it."

> Early Wii tests must have resembled the first encounters of hominids with alien monoliths

What ensued is almost too terrible to describe – almost. For the next 14 hours, clad in sweaty bodysuits and blasted with Klieg lights, the Galoresbys had to play a single minigame collection over and over, glowered over by the producer. "Ben likes the graphics, but I can play too!" Heather yelped, frantically bowing her erhu, which earned an encouraging nod. "Space marines, ninjas – I'm surprised by how many hardcore games there are," Ben offered confidently, then looked shocked when the producer made a vehement neck-cutting gesture, mouthing, "Ixnay on the ardcorehay!" "What people don't realise," Barry ventured nervously, then said all in a rush, "is-that-it's-a-big-upgrade-from-their-last-system?" He flinched until the producer smiled approvingly. Through trial and error over tortuous hours, the Galoresbys homed in on the talking points you know so well from the ad.

"Mom, wouldn't it be great if hardcore gamers all got eye cancer?" Heather chirped wearily. "This really makes their last system look like a steaming pile," Katie droned. "Yeah, this is definitely a videogame console," Ben said in a loud, brittle voice, "not Japanese conceptual art."

The mental and physical toll on the family was gruesome, especially as the mo-cap suits included no zippers or vents. At last, Barry Galoresby's mind broke and – in a chilling echo of the past – he strangled the producer to death with a Nunchuk cable, earning him a life sentence. The virtual Galoresbys, of course, are now one of the most beloved advertorial families ever, after baby Inuit Maniitok became a viral star. Meanwhile, the real Galoresbys have dissipated into anonymous penury, and **Edge** is proud to tell their tragic, incredible story today.

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen


TANK
ENERGY IN A CAN



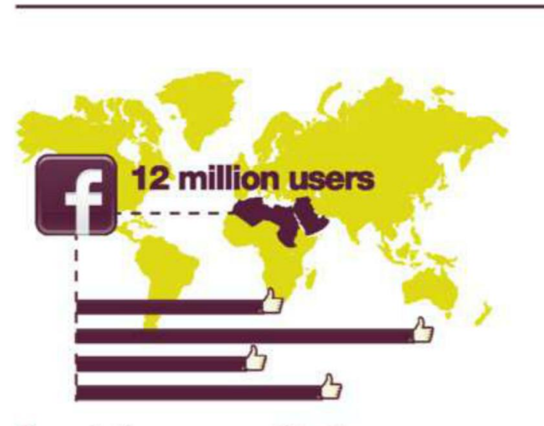

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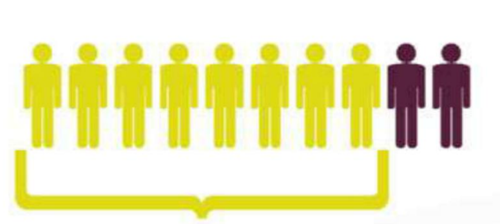
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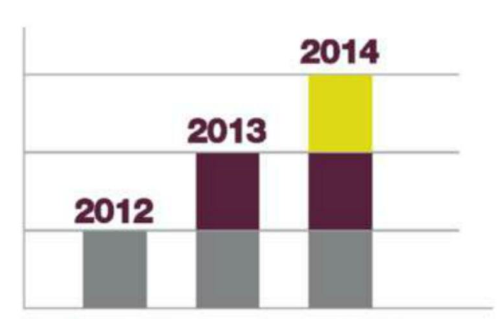
opportunities



Currently there are over 12 million users from the Arab world on Facebook's social games*



80% of the 180 million Arabs under the age of 25 are tech-savvy mobile users*



Games software sales in the MENA region will triple to US$ 3 billion in the next 3 years*

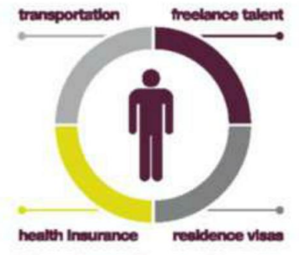


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#257

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content



Redefining online

As we stand on the brink of a new generation of consoles, we find ourselves reflecting on the present one, looking not only at what we want from the next round of console hardware, but also at the things we'd rather leave behind. We would happily bid farewell to *Uncharted*-style automated platforming – specifically the hand reaching out from a ledge to assure you that a jump is safe. We hope the development community is done with FPS games of 'follow the leader' in the style of *Modern Warfare*'s All Ghillied Up mission, too. But if there's one thing we really hope doesn't survive the next-gen transition, it's the bolted-on multiplayer mode.

Watch Dogs (p40) is precisely the kind of game we'd have expected to offer such a mode had it been released a few years ago, but Ubisoft Montreal is taking a different route. Its multiplayer component, which centres on players hacking each other to spread a virus and expand their network of influence, is integrated seamlessly into the singleplayer game. Indeed, if your opponent is particularly skilled, you won't even know they're there. *Uncharted* and *Call Of Duty* may have defined gaming's past five years, but the multiplayer component in one of the coming generation's most exciting titles is in debt to two very different games: *Journey* and *Demon's Souls*.

As the studio formed by the deposed heads of *Modern Warfare* developer Infinity Ward, it's not surprising to see Respawn Entertainment also seeking to move the goalposts for online shooters. *Titanfall* (p44) is taking the opposite tack to *Watch Dogs*, acknowledging the habits of its likely players by making a game with no singleplayer component. Instead it has coined the term 'campaign multiplayer', with narrative beats mixed in with its run-and-gun warfare. Next-generation console gaming may be in its infancy, but how encouraging to see two new approaches to online play after the endless team deathmatch reskins of the past half-decade.

MOST WANTED

Strike Vector PC
'*Hawken* in jets' is an oversimplification, but there are many similarities between *Strike Vector* and Adhesive's mecha battler. Both are multiplayer arena shooters, and both take place in dense urban areas. But the prospect of switching from jet to hover mode while lasers and missiles sear the air holds even more appeal than gravity-bound mecha.

Mario Kart 8 Wii U
It might not dazzle in the way we'd always imagined, but a new entry in the long-running *Mario* series is nothing to be sniffed at. Neither the inclusion of elements from *Mario Kart Wii* nor wobbly GamePad accelerometer controls can lessen the appeal of 1080p shell-flinging.

Mercenary Kings PC
Tribute Games' platformer *Mercenary Kings* owes an obvious debt to Neo Geo shooter *Metal Slug* – and the prospect of a fourplayer co-op with RPG levelling in that vein is an enticing one indeed.



WATCH DOGS

Ubisoft Montreal's open-world action-adventure turns you into a hacker

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house (Montreal)
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Canada
Release Q4

Watch Dogs stood out at E3 2012 because it was the first true glimpse of next-gen gaming, stealing the show in a year when the only real competition came from Wii U launch titles and a couple of next-gen tech demos. Twelve months on and *Watch Dogs* was up there again on Ubisoft's stage, but this time the competition was fierce; creative director **Jonathan Morin** would be forgiven for feeling a little nervous going into the show. "I think it's exciting, actually," he tells us. "We knew from the start that we'd have another [E3]. Usually, if you have another E3 it's because you fucked it up along the way. For us it was about showing that *Watch Dogs* has a lot of new dynamics to offer."

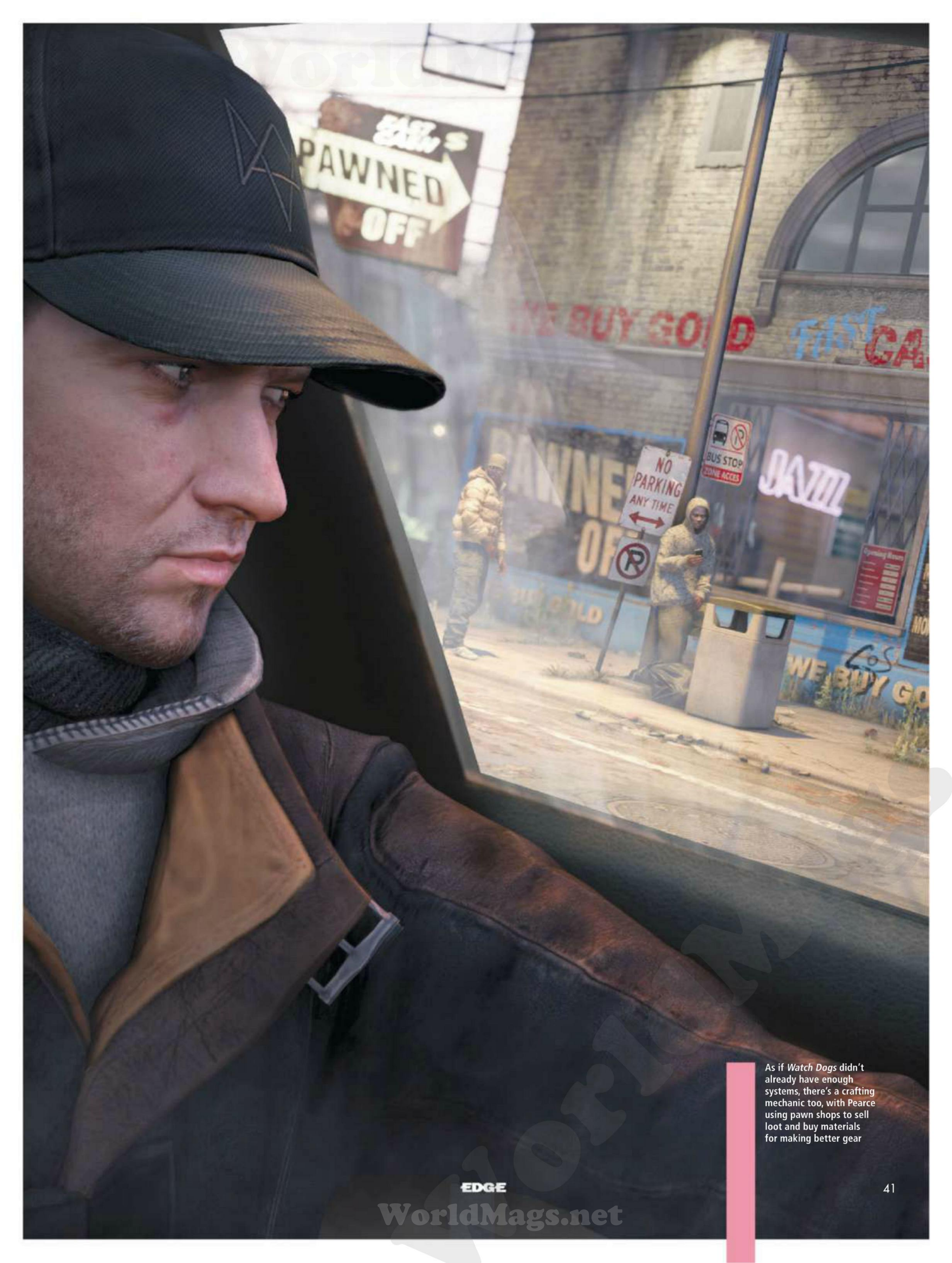
By dynamics, Morin really means systems and the freedom with which to use them. This is a game based on one central conceit – Aiden Pearce, our vigilante protagonist, being able to hack into almost any connected device in the city of Chicago using only a smartphone – from which many systems spill out. There's stealth, driving, thirdperson cover shooting, free running and everything that comes with an open-world setting. But all those individual systems – systems around which entire games are built – are secondary to being able to hack everything and bend the city to your will. Instead of losing the police in a car chase you can raise bollards to stop them at the first corner, or hack a gate to an underground parking lot. You needn't wait for the obvious gap in a guard patrol to sneak by but can set off a car alarm or stereo to lure them away. And why engage cops in a gunfight when you can cause a blackout with a single tap on a smartphone screen, and take them out one by one in the confusion?

"At Ubisoft Montreal we have a lot of know-how and it gives us the luxury of combining those elements and bring new experiences to life – as long as we're adding it because we want to have it and not because others have it," explains Morin, whose CV includes credits on *Far Cry 2* and *Peter Jackson's King Kong*. "That's the key part. [When] people shoot at the player they want to shoot back, but what we wanted was a universe where shooting back's not the only way to play. And I guess the challenge is to bring players to understand the new elements so that they become second nature to them even though they have a gun in their hand. And that's not an easy thing to do."

Visual design is key, of course, and it's no coincidence that when the E3 demo concludes with Pearce surrounded by three police and he raises his hands as if in surrender, there's a smartphone pointing straight at the player,

Computer hacker Clara Lille is exemplary of *Watch Dogs'* muted colour scheme, precise costume design and fascination with alternative culture, as dictated by art director Mathieu LeDuc





As if *Watch Dogs* didn't already have enough systems, there's a crafting mechanic too, with Pearce using pawn shops to sell loot and buy materials for making better gear





Hacking cameras is essential to gain a full view of your surroundings and the task at hand, though you can overdo it. In such a paranoid society people expect to be watched, and if you hack too many things in one spot they'll cotton on and react



Creative director Jonathan Morin has headed *Watch Dogs* for almost five years, starting immediately after he finished the level design work on *Far Cry 2*

its menu screen standing out brightly in the night-time. The blackout Pearce opts for is selected from the same radial menu as his pistol. And anything that can be hacked has an *Assassin's Creed*-style diamond-shaped button prompt over it. As you move around this near-future Chicago, you're constantly being shown how many options you have, mentally bookmarking them for future use.

There's a sense that this is the game Ubisoft has been building towards: its first big next-gen game is both a combination and a culmination of everything it learnt in the current one. But while Morin readily admits that other studios in the Ubisoft family have assisted in development – as is now pretty much standard with the publisher's more ambitious projects – his desire for *Watch Dogs'* central premise to be properly executed has seen him keep a lot of things in-house. In particular he singles out the game's vigilante aspect – dynamic events in which Pearce will be alerted to an imminent crime and, if he so chooses, step in to stop it. "We tried adding another studio in the beginning to help with the vigilante stuff and it [was] very hard," he says. "You need to explain, 'No, it needs to be dynamic. No, it's not scripted. No, I don't want him to run around, I want him to *decide* to run around'. You need the corporate grammar at the centre of [development] and I think we pulled it off."

That's not to say that *Watch Dogs* is completely bereft of the systemic smoke and mirrors of so many of the current generation's open-world games, of course. The streets of Chicago are teeming with pedestrians but they don't have fixed daily routines. "A lot of people started to ask questions like, 'OK, can you follow someone for six hours?' And the answer is no. Why? Because that's pretty difficult to do. A lot of memory would be involved if that happened. You're simulating a bunch of stuff that doesn't occur, and for the player that's losing a lot of opportunity for action." Instead, the game will spot that you're following someone around and project a gameplay event – a vigilante mission, perhaps – onto them.

Ubisoft has been experimenting with companion apps on tablets and smartphones for some time, so it was little surprise that E3 brought confirmation of a sort of cross-platform multiplayer for *Watch Dogs* in which a player on a tablet disables a helicopter to aid Pearce's escape. More surprising was the unveiling of a competitive multiplayer aspect that is naturally based on hacking but most closely resembles *Demon's Souls'* invasion mechanic. Instead of a kill, the goal is to download data from your opponent's smartphone without being seen, with the shooting only starting if you're spotted. Invaders aren't motivated by the promise of loot, but status, with the successful hacker planting a virus that copies part of their victim's inventory, expanding their network and helping them climb a leaderboard. "The [hacked] player doesn't lose anything that is prized but he knows that, 'Jesus, I've worked so hard to be here and five per cent of what I've done is copied to that motherfucker and he's now higher than me in the rankings. Do I wanna go and retaliate and chop that link? Absolutely'." It's a smart system that will create precisely the sort of paranoia in players that a connected, hackable city would create in its inhabitants. Is that really an NPC idling on that street corner checking the news on his phone, or an invader up to no good?

There's a sense that this is the game Ubisoft has been building towards

It says much about the current generation of open-world games that there will continue to be suspicion about just how much player agency there is in *Watch Dogs* right up until it launches. Events might not be scripted, but if there's only one option – a single, conspicuously placed set of bollards to raise in a car chase, perhaps, or no way through a guard patrol without setting off that car alarm – they might as well be. Every fresh look at *Watch Dogs* brings a new system of some kind, and there's enough expertise within Ubisoft to suggest that these systems will all work together individually. How they work in concert will, of course, be key. But one thing's for sure: the more we see of *Watch Dogs*, the more we find to like. ■



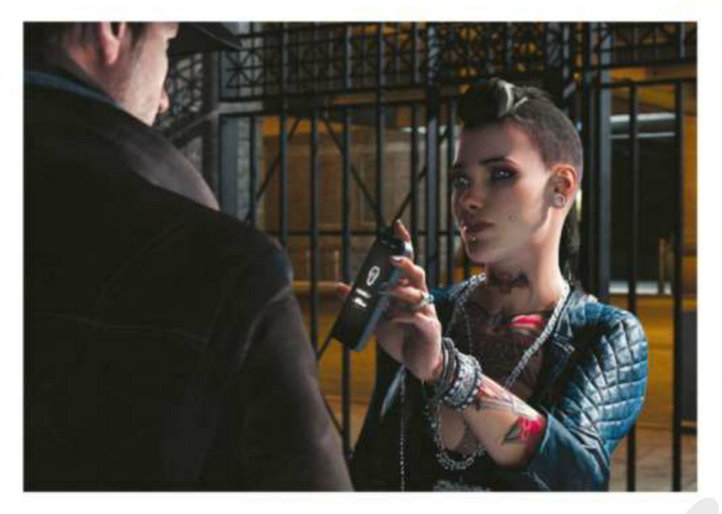
Feature comfort

In a world in which anything can be hacked and so many systems are in play there's a real risk of the whole being bogged down by its component parts. While many studios seek to avoid that, Morin looks at things differently. "You reach feature creep and then you react to it. It's a very different way of looking at it. Creating something new is hard, so it's an insult to the team's intelligence to just say, 'No, I figured it out two years ago. Shut the fuck up and just do it: no feature creep'. If someone understands the main beats and sees some opportunity between [them], and it's safe and solves a problem then that's not feature creep – that's designing and improving."






TOP Pearce links up with T-Bone by hacking into the webcam in the apartment he's broken into. When police arrive we make music play in a corner, giving him a clear run at the door. ABOVE The Chicago River runs into the city and splits into two a little way inland. This provides another means of escape – Pearce causes a blackout and hops in a boat. TOP LEFT Pearce's smartphone can profile city residents. Criminal records might alert him to a crime before it occurs, though he'll also get details of their personal lives. LEFT Stealth isn't solely an on-foot mechanic and applies to the game's vehicles as well – you'll need to try to stay out of helicopter searchlights




LEFT We move in to prevent an imminent crime but the perpetrator takes off. FAR LEFT The smartphone is a key tool and Ubisoft worked with a Russian web security firm to make hacking as true to life as possible





TITANFALL

Respawn's mechanised shooter has legs

Publisher	EA
Developer	Respawn Entertainment
Format	360, PC, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	2014

Mecha are stupid. There already exists a mobile weapons platform capable of dispensing a variety of munitions and traversing almost any terrain at high speed. It's called a tank, and the reasons why you'd replace it with an unstable bipedal walking target are entirely silly – and largely beside the point when the *hows* are more interesting than the *whys*. Stand a tank on two legs and you don't get a better tank, but you might get a better mecha.


The game's utilitarian unit design is more than a little reminiscent of *Front Mission*'s bulky mecha

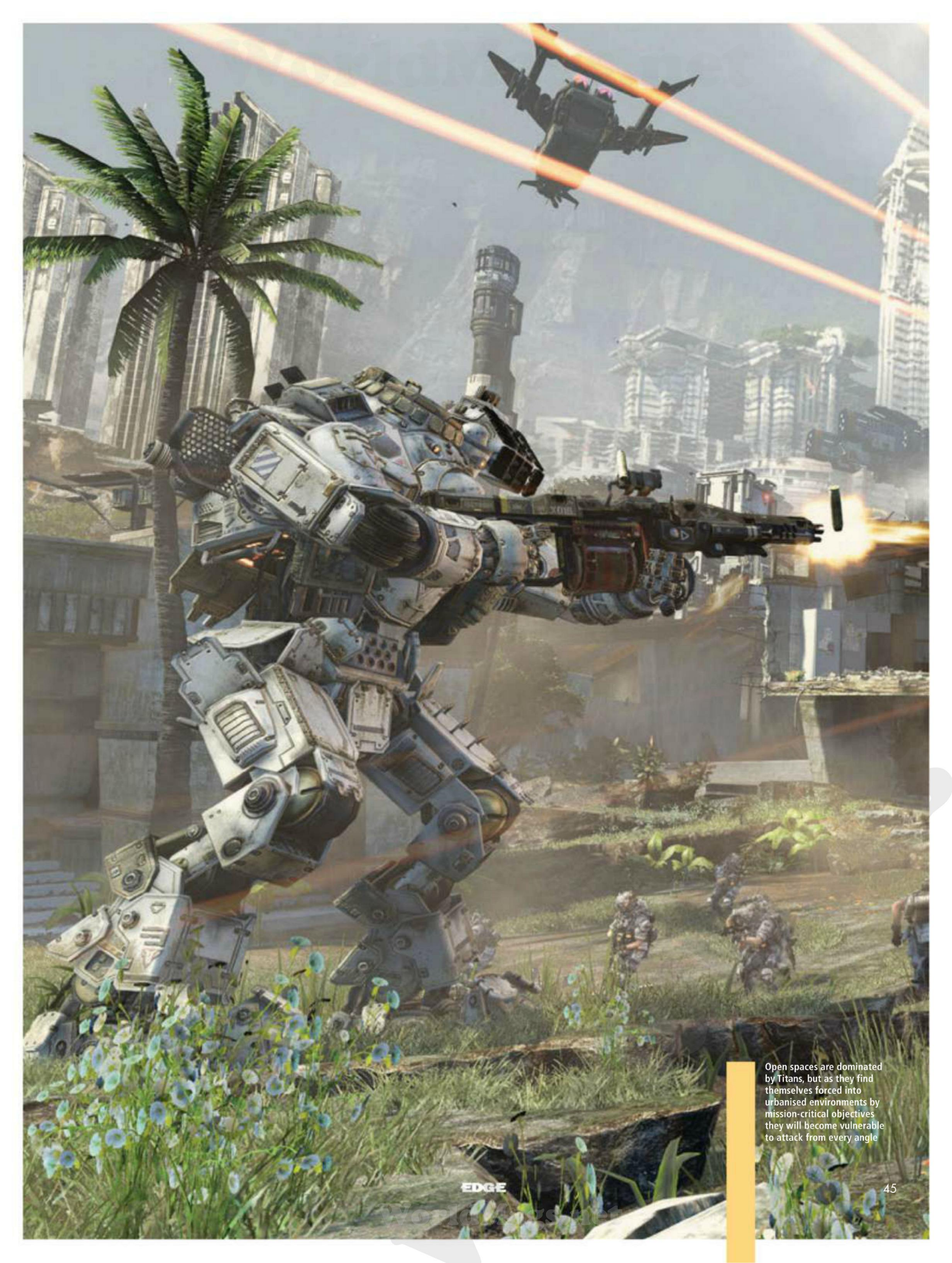
"*Titanfall* isn't fantasy sci-fi," designer **Fairfax 'Mackey' McCandlish** says. "You look at it and you believe this stuff could be built. At Respawn we have art guys from Infinity Ward, new guys from art school, and even guys from Sony Santa Monica, and they put a tonne of research into it to make sure that these things could be built." And build them they did. For three days of E3, Respawn's design work stood tall in LA's Convention Center on a 1:1 scale that demonstrated the implausibility of mecha-on-mecha combat – and the incredible fun that Respawn's recruits had turning tanks into Titans.

The result is a compact but long-legged machine with a bulky barrel chest housing the pilot's cockpit, and inexplicable flat armour covering the vulnerable arms and legs. It takes its cues from modern military design – and, yes, you can build it but you wouldn't want to ride in it. But then that's kind of the point – unlike tanks, Titans are uniquely vulnerable to infantry on *Titanfall*'s skirmish-sized maps.


Respawn Entertainment's Fairfax 'Mackey' McCandlish, lead designer on *Titanfall*

"Our game is still infantry-based," McCandlish explains when asked how *Titanfall* compares with the Infinity Ward refugees' previous work on *Call Of Duty*. "But it's infantry on two different scales, so these maps are all carefully crafted to have all the strengths of a traditional shooter level, but with this scale disparity that you get between Titans and Pilots. If you're a Pilot, we want you to feel you can turn the tide of a fight between two Titans, and if you spot a Titan looking the wrong way, you can scramble up the leg, rip off the panel and start tearing up the innards."

Large infantry only come into play when a player orders a Titan dropped in from above the battlefield. Players deploy as hyper-mobile Pilots and navigate the maps at high speed with a double jump and wall run, while a clock ticks down to Titanfall. Kills knock time off the clock, accelerating Titan construction and lending the game a unique rhythm – kill, kill, kill, Titanfall, kill, kill, kill, Titanfall. The deployment of each walking tank is akin to *Call Of Duty*'s Killstreaks, dramatically reshaping the battle and



Open spaces are dominated by Titans, but as they find themselves forced into urbanised environments by mission-critical objectives they will become vulnerable to attack from every angle







ABOVE **The Titan's eject button is a second chance for the Pilot, allowing them to escape their falling suit and launch themselves onto the enemy who took it out.** RIGHT **Airborne units can come crashing down to the ground during the game's story-driven events**

potentially turning the tide. A friendly Titan in the right place at the right time can level an entire capture point with its vast firepower, but an enemy Titan in the wrong place can hold a hardpoint singlehandedly for as long as it takes players to get the elevation they need to board and destroy the mecha.

"We're not making wide-scale tank-driving maps here," McCandlish explains. "That means we can focus on making the maps just the right size for large infantry and small infantry." And that means dramatic changes in elevation, short sightlines and close-quarter battles on the one map Respawn showcased at Microsoft's E3 press conference.

The deployment of each walking tank is akin to Call Of Duty's Killstreaks

"We're a very small team, so we had to pick a platform if we were going to be on consoles," McCandlish continues, "and Xbox made the most sense. I feel that, in terms of multiplayer and communal gaming, Microsoft is like the Apple of videogames. You can just start your game without finding your disc, you can go to your friend's place and your saves are all there, and with the cloud servers you don't ever have to worry about transferring between hosts or bad latency."

Those dedicated servers will be essential for powering *Titanfall*'s story-driven multiplayer, where player-controlled Pilots and Titans fight alongside AI grunts and giant autopilot Titans on maps with a narrative beginning, middle and end. Multiplayer needs a story in the same way that tanks need legs but, McCandlish argues, adding a little context to multiplayer lets the team shape and direct the action in a way not possible in other shooters. Grunts and giant Titans alter the flow of the battle, objectives change based on narrative moments, and every battle builds towards a spectacular climax, never culminating in a steady, flat march towards a victory or defeat.

And never mind practicality – *Titanfall*'s Titans look the part, give every battle a unique shape and style, and have received the seal of approval where it counts: Japan. Based on press coverage and Internet reaction, Microsoft has secured – in return for financial backing and an entire cloud's worth of dedicated servers – the one shooter capable of shifting Xboxes in the territory where Xbox One will need most help. How stupid do those Titans look now? ■



Cloud and clear

After days of confusion regarding exactly how *Titanfall* uses Microsoft's Azure cloud servers, Respawn engineer John Shiring took to the company's blog to explain why the cloud is so useful. The most immediately obvious benefit is that the game will run on dedicated servers, automatically assigned as and when they're needed, which should reduce the possibility of a launch-day server meltdown. With those servers, Respawn has designed a game that can only work free of peer-to-peer hosting, with AI grunts and boss units driven server-side, leaving the full resources of every console available to the game.











ABOVE CENTRE ***Titanfall*****'s frenetic, high-speed free running makes *****Mirror's Edge***** seem sedate.**
ABOVE **Caught out in the open, Pilots are clearly vulnerable to the Titans' superior firepower**



ABOVE **NPC grunts and Titans – made possible by server-side artificial intelligence – bring to mind the AI 'creeps' that players farm for XP in *****League Of Legends***** and *****Dota 2.***** Killing them or other players knocks seconds off your Titanfall countdown.**
RIGHT **Pilots can be torn from their damaged Titan, crushed and ruthlessly tossed away**



Publisher SCE
Developer In-house (Japan Studio)
Format PS3
Origin Japan
Release September





PUPPETEER

SCE seeks platform adventurers, no strings attached

For quite some way into *Puppeteer*'s lengthy opening level, it's hard to shake the feeling that you're playing a themed *LittleBigPlanet* pack. The outsized proportion of protagonist Kutaro's head to his body, the way each level is presented as a series of dioramas, and the abundance of different heads to find all make use of the aesthetic language set out by Media Molecule's series. There are other inspirations here, too, from Studio Ghibli and the Brothers Grimm to Clover Studio's *Okami* in the delicate, hand-drawn cutscenes, but despite this initial familiarity, it soon becomes clear that Japan Studio has plenty of unique ideas that imbue the game with its own personality.

For one thing, the time that the studio has invested in getting its platforming right – one staffer spent a full year refining the jump mechanic – has paid off. Movement has a tight, springy texture that echoes the clunking set changes (see 'Chewing the scenery') that occur as you progress through each level. It's a marked improvement on *LBP*'s less predictable character physics, and just as well: behind all that charisma, *Puppeteer* hides a surprisingly tough challenge.

Our demo starts with a tutorial level in which Kutaro finds himself turned into a headless puppet after an encounter with the Moon Bear King. Without a head he'll soon die, but fortunately there are 100 alternative noggins to be found, along with four hero heads that grant special powers.

The standard heads act as hybrid between a traditional energy bar and more fashionable recharging health. You can hold up to three at any one time, switching between them with the D-pad. Take a hit and your head will roll away, disappearing after a few seconds and





TOP **The Wrestler's Mexico-themed world fittingly includes a fight with a spandex-wearing opponent.** ABOVE **Director Gavin Moore was lead animator on *Forbidden Siren 2* and *Siren: Blood Curse*, but *Puppeteer*'s horror borrows more from fairytales than his past work**

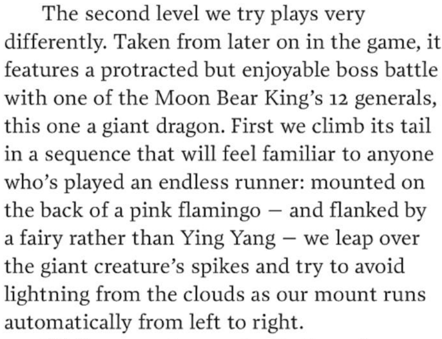
BELOW **The heads are hidden in objects, with the Pirate head found inside a hook. Discoveries are celebrated on a platform that brings Kutaro out of the stage to hover over the audience**







LEFT **Ninja bomb weapons can also be used to solve puzzles. Toss one at a smaller enemy and it'll juggle it humorously like a hot bun before it explodes**



LEFT **As well as the additional strength it grants you, the Wrestler head allows you to pound enemies with a flaming, spiralling nosedive**

requiring a potentially perilous dash to recover it in time. You acquire continues by collecting 100 Moon Sparkles, glowing shards that spill from fallen enemies and hide in the set decorations around you.

You're aided in your search for Moon Sparkles and new heads by Ying Yang, a floating cat in the service of a mysterious witch, who offers you her help at the beginning of the game. You move Ying Yang around the screen with the right stick, and interact with objects (which give a little shake as you hover over them) by tapping R2. There are numerous secrets and pathways to be found too, but these require you to use your head (well, heads), a faint floating image indicating where each one can be used. Early on, a burger head transforms a boring-looking sandwich into its much springier fast-food counterpart, allowing Kutaro to reach a platform previously out of reach. Later, during a tower ascent, a spider head opens a doorway into a bonus stage by attracting a large spider's attention.

Later in the level you acquire Calibrus, a powerful pair of scissors that let you snip away at both enemies and scenery. You cut enemies by tapping Square, removing their armour piece by piece, the fallen carcass sprouting a stem; prune that and a child's soul is released. Jump before hitting Square and you'll Sky Cut, travelling through the air for as long as there's material to sever. Larger enemies will often wear cloaks ripe for the scissoring, or a blade-tempting seam.

The second level we try plays very differently. Taken from later on in the game, it features a protracted but enjoyable boss battle with one of the Moon Bear King's 12 generals, this one a giant dragon. First we climb its tail in a sequence that will feel familiar to anyone who's played an endless runner: mounted on the back of a pink flamingo – and flanked by a fairy rather than Ying Yang – we leap over the giant creature's spikes and try to avoid lightning from the clouds as our mount runs automatically from left to right.

While we can't stop the bird's sprint, we can shave off a little speed by pushing the left stick in the opposite direction. Speed boosts, meanwhile, are granted by bottles of what appears to be Tabasco sauce. At certain points, we jump from the bird and make use of Kutaro's Sky Cutting ability, following the path of lengths of rope in order to avoid

Movement has a tight, springy texture that echoes the clunking set changes

falling to our death. Occasionally the path splits, offering a riskier option for rewards.

The final encounter takes place on a series of cloud platforms while the dragon spews fireballs and attacks with swipes of its tail. It also does a good job of showcasing Kutaro's hero heads: a Knight's head gives you a shield that can reflect enemy projectiles; the Ninja's head lets you throw bombs; a pounding attack is made available by the Wrestler's head; and the Pirate's head gives you a grappling hook. Defeating the dragon requires all four abilities – along with some judicious Sky Cutting – and finishes with a short QTE sequence.

That *Puppeteer* still manages to stand out amid all the next-gen buzz is testament to its mesmerising art style. As with *LittleBigPlanet*, though, players drawn in by those visuals may be put off by the level of difficulty that awaits. But if Japan Studio can maintain the sheer level of imagination and energy on show in these two levels throughout the entire game, it will be an exhilarating adventure indeed.



Chewing the scenery

Puppeteer's theatrical setup sees each level's sets shift around you as you play. While boss levels appear to play out slightly differently, in early stages the effect results in a series of distinct challenges. Rather than simply running from left to right, you negotiate each set (collecting as many Moon Sparkles en route as possible) to reach the glowing portal that triggers a props switch. Fourth-wall breakages never dull the adventure, however. The sense of performance is enhanced by the gasps and applause of an unseen audience, and the brilliantly histrionic narration. In fact, the voice acting is excellent.



BELOW **The sight of the Moon King Bear's walking steampunk fortress instantly brings to mind Howl's Moving Castle. The influence of Studio Ghibli's work can also be found in the big-headed witch who helps you**







Publisher Warner Bros Montreal
Developer Warner Bros
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin Canada
Release October 25



BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS

Warner Bros Montreal does an excellent Rocksteady impression

One of Rocksteady's less celebrated achievements, alongside making The Dark Knight a menacing yet thrillingly vulnerable videogame protagonist, is that it fashioned a pair of games that make for surprisingly good companion pieces. *Arkham Asylum*'s crumbling, narrow corridors perfectly suit a tightly focused game about Batman the stealthy predator. *Arkham City* lacks that potency but instead offers the opportunity to be Batman the Gothic hero, swooping over a city lavishly packed with incidental detail and DC lore. Rather than round out the trilogy with a third, final take on the Caped Crusader, though, Warner Bros Montreal seems to have made *Arkham City 2*.

That's no bad thing, of course, but there's no escaping the fact that the new studio's additions are bolt-ons to existing systems. For instance, Batman has a Remote Claw now, a device that adds a dash of slapstick physics fun to stealthy encounters by letting you attach enemies to items, environmental features and even each other. It's a fun toy, perfectly suited to the kind of experimental sadism that the series' stealth sequences encourage, although in its current form it threatens to turn Batman into a gargoyle-perched sniper, picking off enemies from afar.



***Arkham Origins*' combat,** meanwhile, is still built on Rocksteady's familiar, rhythmic foundation, in which you chain attacks and counter-attacks against throngs of thugs, while identifying and subduing advanced enemy types with more specific techniques. *Origins* adds variety to these brawls via two new enemies: Enforcers are armoured brutes who can only be put down with a stun attack and an armour-wrecking flurry of blows, while Martial Arts Experts can counter Batman's own counters (and, yes, you can counter their counter with another counter), stalling the flow of combat.

Even the game's biggest addition turns out to be effectively cosmetic. Rocksteady's Batman has always struggled to live up to the moniker of World's Greatest Detective, but *Origins* wants to fix this by expanding the brief Detective mode segments of previous games, in which you'd follow trails or scour sections of the map for obvious clues. Now, you can fast forward, reverse and walk around wireframe simulations of crime scenes in search not just of clues, but the moment they appear. In the section we play, Batman needs to pinpoint the location of a sniper who shot down a helicopter, and we must reverse back to the moment the bullet hit the chopper in order to work out its trajectory. The potential is here for more involved puzzles than those Rocksteady offered, but in practice Batman's inner monologue walks you through it.

***Origins* features a younger Batman… but the series has reached middle age**

Still, Warner Montreal's take on a yuletide Gotham marks a genuine departure from the previous games. *Arkham City*'s industrial setting will be reused (though given *Origins*' prequel status, the area will be distinct from its incarnation as a walled-off correctional facility) but much of *Origins* takes place in skyscraper-filled New Gotham. Between them, the two settings encompass both takes on Bruce Wayne's home city: the tumbledown Gothic slum of Tim Burton's movies and Batman Begins, as well as the surrogate New York seen in The Dark Knight and its sequel. The variation is welcome, and New Gotham's predilection for towering office blocks should also make for some fine swooping grounds.

Arkham Origins might feature a younger Batman facing supervillains for the first time, but the series has reached comfortable middle age. After the shock of *Asylum* and the bold transition of *City*, *Origins* seems to be assuredly offering more of the latter game.



Jingle brawls

Arkham Origins' Christmas setting can't help but echo Die Hard, which similarly used the contrast between seasonal festivities and terrorist attacks for dramatic effect. It works well in Gotham, with the Christmas trees and fairy lights nicely offsetting all the gargoyles. *Origins*' premise is that criminal kingpin Black Mask has invited a group of assassins to compete to kill Batman on Christmas Eve, while other criminals take advantage of the situation. It's a less convincing excuse for a mostly civilian-free city than *Arkham City*'s prison slum.



LEFT **All the various thugs wear outfits identifying the villains with whom they're affiliated. These chaps belong to Anarky – an anarchist anti-hero not usually associated with Batman's early adventures**

RIGHT **A young Bane appears, and Warner Bros seems to have resisted giving him a vocodered voice. He's yet to be infected by Venom, however, so still retains mostly human proportions.**
BELOW **After it looked like Batman was dropping a thug to his death in the trailer, we're pleased to report the goon is dangling on a rope**

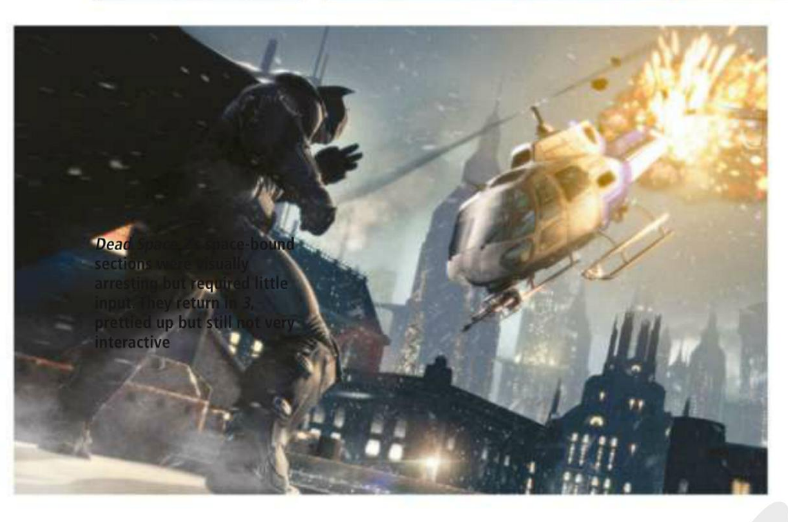








TOP **While the World's Greatest Assassin, Deathstroke, will be a playable character in Challenge rooms, he's only turning up as preorder DLC. There's no indication yet as to whether or not Catwoman will be making a return.**
ABOVE **Fresh from playing grizzled everyman Joel in *The Last Of Us*, Troy Baker is now responsible for the Joker's cackling laugh. The weirdness of not hearing Mark Hamill hasn't worn off for us yet, but Baker is unrecognisable all the same**



***Dead Space 2*'s space-bound sections were visually arresting but required little input. They return in 3, prettied up but still not very interactive**



Publisher SCE
Developer Evolution Studios
Format PS4
Origin UK
Release Winter





DRIVECLUB

It's the taking part that counts in Evolution Studios' next-gen racer

Evolution Studios kicked off the current generation of PlayStation hardware with *MotorStorm*, comfortably setting a new visual benchmark in the process. *DriveClub* isn't quite there yet – the build we've played was only 35 per cent complete, which seems a little on the low side for a PS4 launch game – but the pleasant, although hardly astonishing, landscape of the fictional Kinloch track we tried offers long draw distances and some occasionally eyecatching lighting.

It whips past the windscreen at a decent enough lick – although not, in its current state, at the target 60fps. Tree and foliage models have a whiff of placeholder about them, while tyre smoke isn't quite the next-gen volumetric spectacle we'd hoped for. The cars look great, of course, but you'll be hard-pressed to notice the fully modelled headlight lenses out on track. There have been few better showcases for new hardware than racing games, and it says much that *Gran Turismo 6*, running on the seven-year-old PS3, currently looks sharper than Evolution's demo build. A fair chunk of that remaining 65 per cent of development is presumably set aside for visual improvements.

Still, the handling model seems to be all there. The four cars we've tried – including the Pagani Huayra and Hennessey Venom – display distinct, unruly personalities. The game's most powerful cars need to be coaxed rather than hurried to full acceleration for fear of losing traction, and we found ourselves wrestling with torque steer in the Venom on straights. The DualShock 4's much-improved sticks make it easy to make small adjustments to your line with none of their predecessors' skittering flimsiness. But the motion-control option, predictably enough, doesn't fare quite





TOP **We haven't had the opportunity to go head-to-head yet, but even in time trial there's a strong sense of competition thanks to on-track challenges and the presence of ghost cars**

BELOW ***DriveClub*'s environments still need some work, but car interiors are exemplary, doing away with the excessive darkness so common in its peers' equivalents**







LEFT **Evolution has struck a balance between cars that feel weighty and dangerous, but aren't so unforgiving as to be off-putting to less seasoned drivers**



ABOVE **While *DriveClub*'s car models sport detailing that is, arguably, excessive, simply knowing that the team has taken the time to model its vehicles with such care adds a welcome layer of luxury to proceedings**

so well. Overall it's a weighty, detailed handling model – but, just like *MotorStorm*, one that trades realism for immediate thrills. It's at odds with Evolution's talk of replicating the supercar ownership experience, but plays to the strengths of the game's team ethos.

Our focus quickly shifts to the challenges found in every event: Overdrives and Face-Offs. The former can be performed anywhere on the track and includes maintaining high speed for as long as you can, perhaps, or putting in a clean drive for a full split. Face-Offs, meanwhile, occur at set points on the track marked by colour-coded zones, which invites fond comparisons with *OutRun 2*'s Heart Attack Mode. They offer similar challenges to Overdrives, but your performance is compared with a racer in an opposing club. Doing either earns Fame, which feeds into your club's reputation.

While being goaded into drifting through a corner may prove a minor irritation for drivers with their eye on a fast run, ignoring challenges and putting in a sterling lap time will still bring in Fame. If you do take up every challenge thrown at you, however, the need to constantly adjust your driving style makes for a pleasingly varied challenge. Crucially, the setup means every driver can contribute to their club's success, no matter their skill level.

The current build doesn't feature any realtime multiplayer, but it does show off the asynchronous aspects of *DriveClub*: our demo was played on a network of eight systems, with players able to drop in and out without actually racing against each other. Tracks are filled with ghosts of other drivers' runs, all accompanied by a photo of the competitor in question displayed next to your own at the bottom of the screen whenever you enter a Face-Off. It provides the sense of heightened competition that Criterion's Autolog so successfully created. It's hectic stuff, even

The DualShock 4's much-improved sticks make it easy to make small adjustments

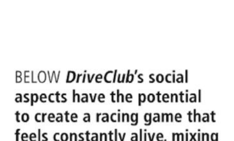
when you're out on the tarmac alone, the sense of camaraderie from seeing your club's standings ebb and flow between races encouraging you to head back in for another shot. It might prove enough to distinguish the game from its competitors, but right now *DriveClub* feels a little lost in a field of extremely capable opponents.

DriveClub doesn't live up to Evolution's lofty promises yet, but the studio has turned around a less-than-spectacular early showing in the past, with *MotorStorm: Apocalypse*. But the *MotorStorm* series benefits from a brand of drama that goes some way towards distracting from its lack of polish, and this is a shield behind which *DriveClub* can't hide. The game's most important aspects – its vehicle handling and multiplayer integration – already feel confident, though, and the studio's track record suggests that it can take this to a photo finish. ■



Gaining perspective

Despite early rumours, *DriveClub* doesn't force you to stick with an in-car view. Tapping R1 will cycle you through the usual array of perspectives, including a dash cam that evokes the kind of homemade enthusiast video you can find on YouTube. Evolution would still prefer you to use the in-car view, though: how else will you be able to appreciate the painstakingly rendered carbon fibre weave? If you do decide on the chase cam, however, a cosmetic damage model will let you scuff the bodywork – Evolution has yet to reveal whether the final game will also feature handling damage, though.



BELOW ***DriveClub*'s social aspects have the potential to create a racing game that feels constantly alive, mixing realtime and asymmetric multiplayer to ensure a buzzing sense of competition**



Publisher Square Enix
Developer In-house
Format PC, PS3
Origin Japan
Release August 27



FINAL FANTASY XIV: A REALM REBORN

Square Enix's troubled MMOG re-emerges

Final Fantasy XIV had a single but imposing task when it debuted in 2010: translate the atmosphere and lore of *Final Fantasy* to the MMORPG genre on PC. It's a job that required an understanding of the MMOG – its intricate systems and reasons for its appeal – combined with a keen eye for what makes Square Enix's rich fantasy worlds feel unique and, despite their canonical disparity, universal.

Nine months, a critical drubbing and a revolted, revolting fanbase later, *FFXIV* had failed. The interfaces were cluttered and confusing, and much of the limited, charmless gameworld felt like placeholder. Combat, at odds with the characters' dynamic movement, was sluggish and laborious. It felt unfinished, a work in progress undeserving of a brand name built on polish. And while the MMORPG is a genre frequently iterated upon, rebalanced and expanded through patches and content updates, Square Enix opted to do something entirely different: it shut it down. In the time since the blackout, it has remixed the development team – the resignation of its original director making way for company veteran Naoki Yoshida – and incubated the game behind closed doors in a bid to right the manifold wrongs of its first attempt.

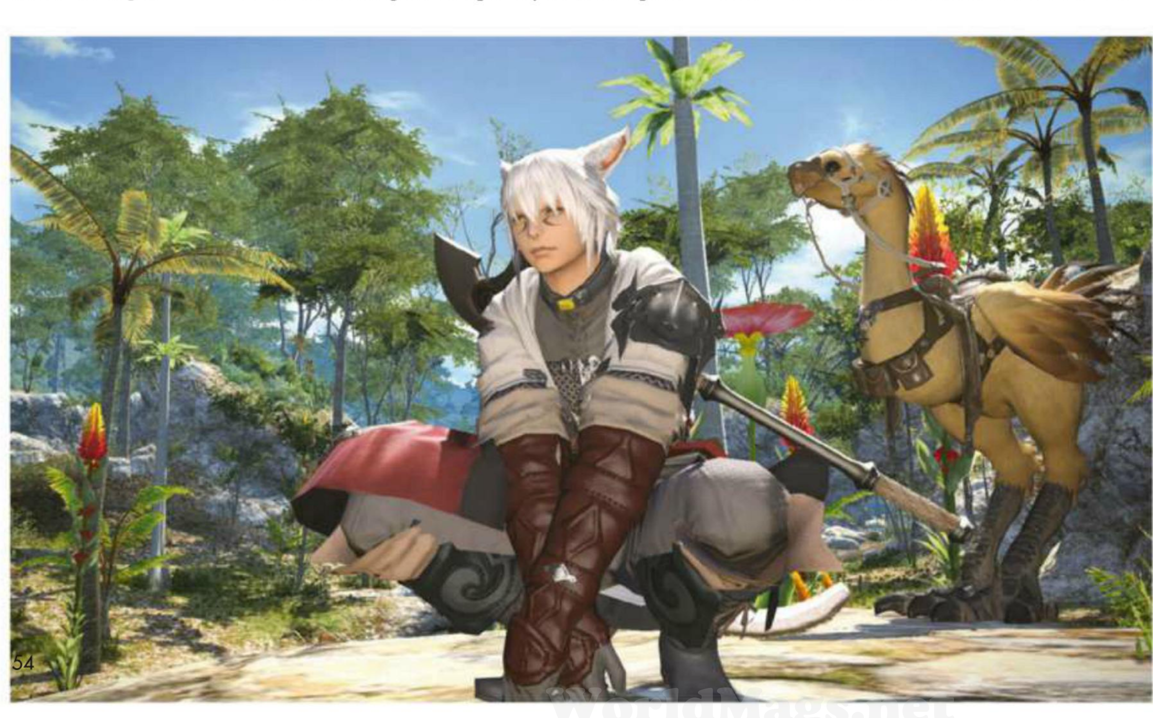
Opening the doors again for public beta testing must have been a nervous moment for the team, but news that *FFXIV* has had over a million sign-ups is encouraging. It's also unsurprising: the game has become a legend of game development hell, known as a titanic misfire in a series for which failure – in terms of sales and popularity, if not always critical response – has never been an option. Many of *FFXIV*'s newest recruits are perhaps only there to see what all the fuss was about. The





TOP **Character and costume design is central to the sense that Eorzea belongs to the wider *Final Fantasy* mythology. There's a heaving wardrobe to upgrade as you journey through the game's lands in search of the perfect pair of leather tights.**
ABOVE **A trusty Chocobo steed is essential for later adventuring as the map opens up and you begin to explore the vast expanses of the plains of the Shroud**

BELOW **The environments may be a world away from those of the original *FFXIV*, but the most immediately striking changes are to the characters themselves. Their animations, from resting stances and poses to combat sword swings and pole jabs, are fluid and elegant**







RIGHT **Chocobos, those lanky yellow creatures that look like bizarro Big Birds, make a welcome return as rentable transport in *A Realm Reborn*. However, you'll have to grind your way to level ten to get a shot at one, which takes a fair few hours' play**

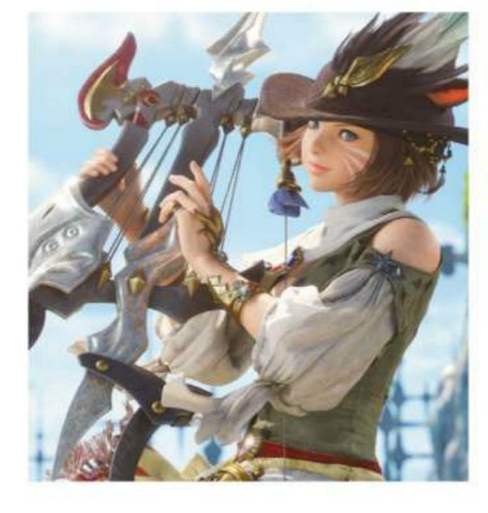
wealth of early sign-ups will also be down to Square Enix finally targeting two platforms, with PC and PS3 players sharing the same servers and in-game space (so troubled was the game's original launch that a promised PS3 beta never saw the light of day). With the added challenge of delivering an experience that can cater to two different audiences, it would be hard to dispute the ambition and determination of this second attempt.

On the evidence of our first few hours in the refreshed world of Eorzea, it looks like the new creative team has got the job done. Many of the major core complaints about *FFXIV* have been addressed. The world feels richer and more identifiably a part of the *Final Fantasy* mythology (complete with rentable Chocobos), the combat is quicker and more lively thanks to some stellar character models and animation (the engine has been massively overhauled), and the world map has been expanded to encompass a greater spread of locales packed with quests, characters and opportunity.

There's actually a little too much opportunity at first, as you naively amass a quest log too big to tackle – which also draws attention to the game's current major failing, its map system. Although the combat, item and inventory menus are simple and easy to use (crucial for players who are wielding a DualShock), navigating the map can be a tricky business as you memorise key areas, head for quest objectives and get sidetracked by Fate events – random, area-specific activities that pop up to encourage you to rack up some quick and easy XP by, for example, slaying a marauding magician. There's a minimap displaying a range of local objectives and a main map intended to help you find your way to towns. However, the two maps feel detached from each other, and you'll fumble around a great deal trying to figure out which way you should be sprinting to make your next rendezvous or slay your next pack of rogue Anole raptor-things.

It ties in to the more general issue – particularly for MMORPG virgins – of the steep learning curve. Following an expectedly gorgeous CGI intro and brief expository cutscene, you're dropped straight into Eorzea a little too coldly. There are a few early tutorial-style fetch quests to teach you the ropes of emotes and inventory management, but it's a world that may have taken its openness a little too literally for newcomers. With the servers bursting at the seams, it can be even more difficult to find a comfort zone as you explore, taking in the game's vast assortment of ideas and activities, from crafting systems to markets.

Square Enix seems to have corrected the fundamental mistakes of *FFXIV*'s first disastrous strike, but it won't be an easy ride for a publisher known for setting high (and perhaps unrealistic) sales targets for core IPs like *Tomb Raider* and *Sleeping Dogs*. The MMORPG can take a long time to prove successful, popular and fruitful. It's a genre that's made by its community as much as its creative direction, and with Square Enix uniting two separate audiences – each versed to different degrees in this niche genre – it's uncertain whether the experiment will prove to be a hotbed of positive social gaming or a conflicted, hostile world of two tribes: the keyboard-haves and the have-nots.





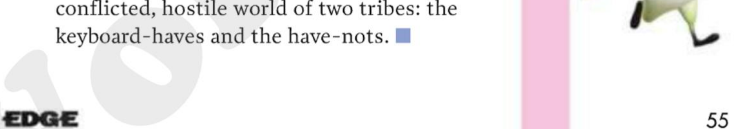
Face time

There's a massive amount of character customisations to choose from before you make the leap into Eorzea. You'll select everything from race and class to length of tail and colour of hair. It's all made easy by user-friendly menus and detailed summaries. Every detail in *FFXIV* now feels coherent and purposeful, supporting the sense that the game is now more fully and appropriately feeding into – and drawing inspiration from – Square Enix's long history of *Final Fantasy* lore.



BELOW **The game's core cast are as stylish as you'd expect from the series that's given us Lightning and Cloud, but it's even more interesting to discover the unique ways in which players have used the developer's tools to customise their characters**









Publisher Nintendo
Developer In-house
Format Wii U
Origin Japan
Release December



SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

Is the first multiplayer 3D Mario enough to sate expectant fans?

Super Mario 3D World allows you to look around its environments by moving the GamePad. The feature, which turns the camera through roughly 270 degrees in any direction, is designed to afford you greater freedom to view Mario's handsome new 3D landscapes, but ironically draws more attention to the fact that the game plays fast and loose with the promise made by its title.

There's nothing in our demo to suggest that *3D World* will be anything less than a fine Mario outing, but even the most ardent series fan will find it difficult to play down the sense of disappointment at being served up on Nintendo's most powerful hardware to date what feels like a spiritual successor to 3DS's *Super Mario 3D Land*. That said, this is an exquisitely enhanced successor, certainly looking the part even if it doesn't necessarily play it.

The game's stages are vibrant and pleasingly chunky, everything imbued with that particular solidity that Nintendo artists have somehow made their own. Standing on a viewing platform during one of the stages pans the camera down and to the right, showing you in the hazy distance the towering obstacle course you're about to tackle, and hinting at a more open world. It's a moment that draws some surprising parallels with *Fez*, and not just aesthetically.

Like *Fez*, the ostensibly 2D gameplay doesn't preclude multiple routes. The three stages Nintendo has demoed so far have all manner of alternative paths and secrets, some only accessible with the new Cat Bell powerup and others teased out by rubbing and poking at the landscape through the GamePad's touchscreen. Some of those secrets are obvious – a patch of grass or flowers, for

Occasionally the game will echo *New Super Mario Bros*, but for the most part the greater space afforded by the levels ensures it feels like a very different game





TOP **Bullet Bills can be redirected with a well-aimed punch.** ABOVE **You can share unwanted powerups with other players, storing them on the GamePad screen until they're needed**







LEFT **Mario has never looked so dapper. The HD makeover suits the series' clean lines well – although you will hanker for a wider world to explore as a result**

instance, that throw out a coin or two when rubbed – but most aren't marked. Searching every inch of the level just in case quickly becomes tiresome, but there is smart use of the GamePad elsewhere, such as the jump pads that are triggered by tapping the screen.

The alternative routes aren't simply there for show, or even replayability – that branching design in a 3D space provides more room to breathe in multiplayer, reducing the claustrophobic chaos of the *New Super Mario Bros* games. Spread out, and the camera draws back; fall behind, and you'll be whisked back to the main group in a bubble.

Despite the name, the most obvious touchstone here isn't *Super Mario World* but what we know in the west as *Super Mario Bros 2*. Twenty-five years after release, the game's four cast members feel fresh in their new context, their differing playstyles adding both variety and an added sense of cooperation in multiplayer. Peach's floating ability makes crossing wide gaps a breeze, making her the natural choice for newcomers, while Luigi is slippery to control but can leap much higher than his comrades.

Although packed with paths, the first level we see – a trek through the verdant green Mushroom Kingdom – provides little opportunity for any meaningful cooperation. Another, which links its islands with tangles of transparent pipes, makes better use of all four players. You can choose which direction you flow through the various junctions, and work together to remove blockages faster, avoiding marauding enemies as you go. The giant Yoshi on which you ride in a brief water-based slalom can leap higher if all four players on its back jump at the same time.

The new Cat Bell powerup dresses the cast in lurid catsuits – Mario's, oddly, is yellow rather than red – and adds a swipe attack to the characters' moveset, as well as the ability to climb up walls. It allows for *3D World*'s vertical assault courses as well as alternative routes, and provides access to many of the game's secrets. If you retain it until the end of a course, you can even scamper up the end-of-level flagpole for the maximum bonus.

The suit won't get you out of every bind, though: try to grip a surface while falling too fast and you'll slide down it, leaving claw marks as you go. Cresting the lip of a cliff or the top of a large enemy often feels awkward too, your natural instinct to jump throwing you away from the surface, forcing restraint in a series that revels in having none.

The branching design in a 3D space provides more room to breathe in multiplayer

Super Mario 3D World is clearly being sold on its multiplayer – this is, after all, the first 3D *Mario* game to offer it – and we were relieved to see that Nunchuk support has been added in this second hands-on with the game. At E3, those not using the GamePad were forced to navigate 3D space with the Wii Remote's D-pad. From what we've seen so far it's tempting to view the game as an awkward hybrid: an interesting experiment in multiplayer that lacks the boundless creativity of its creator's previous efforts. How Nintendo EAD – the team behind both *Mario Galaxy* games – designs this familiar world for four players will be the key factor in whether *Super Mario 3D World* is received as an essential entry in one of videogames' most revered series or simply as a stopgap designed to plug a hole in an under-populated release schedule. ■



Plate holder

Nintendo has shown five levels of the game so far, the final one a boss encounter in an arena that encourages as much backstabbing as it does teamwork. Starting on a platform some distance above a circus ring, players hop into a cradle that transports them to the ground. The few seconds this takes are long enough to catalyse a mini brawl as players attempt to knock each other off, but the subsequent boss encounter – which requires players to scramble up giant, plate-balancing worms, before leaping onto the ringleader – provides so few coins that you'll happily knock your friends into the creatures' maws just to top the leaderboard.



ABOVE **On the levels we played, the Cat Bell powerup was so plentiful that we barely spent any time out of the catsuit.** BELOW **There's a simple joy in just sharing Mario's world with friends**







GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Publisher Rockstar **Developer** In-house **Format** Xbox 360, PS3 **Origin** UK **Release** September



With launch quickly approaching, Rockstar gives us a whistlestop tour of Los Santos and its surrounds, as well as a glimpse of the game's heists. We're shown two possible approaches to a jewellery store robbery: gas through the air vents or a traditional stick-up. There's a dramatic abduction that sees Michael, suspended from a helicopter, abseil down a building, smash a window and grab his quarry, supported by Franklin peering down his sniper scope across the street. You'll invest the takings in BAWSAQ – the game world's stock exchange – property and fast cars. A tantalising glimpse of Rockstar's most ambitious project yet.

DARK SOULS II

Publisher Namco Bandai **Developer** From Software **Format** Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Origin Japan **Release** March 2014



As if the series wasn't challenging enough already, *Dark Souls II* director Yui Tanimura wants to give players more freedom to explore the world, depending on "how willing or brave" they are. This will certainly up the sense of adventure, but it's harder to reconcile with the studio's ambition to make the sequel more accessible – we thought our early meeting with Taurus Demon was bad, but imagine starting your *Dark Souls* playthrough with a trip to Anor Londo.

ROUTINE

Publisher Lunar Software **Developer** In-house **Format** PC
Origin UK **Release** TBA



Early gameplay footage of firstperson horror *Routine* shows off its creepy, starkly beautiful abandoned moonbase setting. It all looks suitably nervewracking, with Oculus Rift support further quickening your already racing pulse as you turn tail and scarper from the game's Terminator-like enemies.

INCOGNITIA

Publisher Klei Entertainment **Developer** In-house **Format** PC
Origin Canada **Release** Summer



Developed alongside *Don't Starve* by much of the *Mark Of The Ninja* team, Klei's latest is a procedurally generated turn-based tactical espionage game. Whereas *XCOM* is 90 per cent about positioning, co-founder Jamie Cheng explains, in *Incognitia* information gathering is of far greater importance.

D4

Publisher Microsoft Studios **Developer** Access Games
Format Xbox One **Origin** Japan **Release** TBA



Dark Dreams Don't Die sees producer Hidetaka 'SWERY65' Suehiro bring some of the themes explored in 2010's *Deadly Premonition* to Xbox One through Kinect. Using what Suehiro calls "relaxed" gestural controls, you play David, a private detective who lost his memory after the murder of his wife.

THIS IS YOUR DESTINY

Format 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Publisher Activision
Developer Bungie
Release 2014

Perhaps the most reductive description of *Destiny* would be '*Halo* with iron sights', and as we toss a grenade into a melee of Fallen soldiers who dive for cover behind their Devil Walker tank it even seems accurate in a simplistic way. But it's at once the highest flattery and the deepest affront for the game Bungie is building. Yes, the left trigger raises your weapon in *Call Of Duty* fashion; and yes, the encounter at the end of the game's E3 demo plays out like the best of *Halo*'s setpiece firefights – that colossal scale, those combat arenas into which powerful enemies fall from the sky, the AI smart enough to look for cover and attack when you least expect it – but *Destiny*'s scope goes far beyond anything in any *Halo*. In a golden age of exploration and discovery, humanity reached out and colonised the solar system aided by The Traveler – an alien sphere, now floating inert above the Earth's surface. Invaders arrived and drove humanity back to their own world, then scorched the Earth's surface until only one city remained. *Destiny*'s story begins generations later, as humankind prepares to fight back, reclaiming forgotten technologies from its lost cities and far-off colonies. These destinations aren't *Halo*'s linear levels, but expansive spaces where you'll meet hundreds of other players, see spectacular sights in ways no other player has seen, flee from invincible armies then return to fight alongside friends, and explore open worlds that top out at two square kilometres. Yes, *Destiny* feels like *Halo*, but that's only the beginning.



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alo was a strong foundation, and a chance for Bungie to learn how players work. "I think we did two things well with the *Halo* games," creative lead **Joe Staten** says. "One, we told a story that you can play by yourself or with a small group of friends. And two, we made a great hardcore, competitive game. Between those two choices we tried to do other things – *Firefight*, for example – but the options are very slim, and I think that's true for most shooters. Between those two poles there's a vast gulf of opportunities but a lack of choices. We want to very carefully bring those two communities together and open up those choices; we want to take people out of their silos."

Destiny offers you open worlds to explore alone or alongside two friends, and then reaches out and snatches other players and squads into your game, invisibly matchmaking on the fly, creating a massively multiplayer game with all the advantages of classic firstperson shooter multiplayer. It's a small and simple idea, immeasurably complex in its execution and implications but well demonstrated on Sony's stage at E3 when a three-man fireteam journeyed into the ruins of a facility in Old Russia, where thousands of civilians once fled toward the facility's shuttles in a desperate bid to escape Earth. They all died at the wheels of the vehicles that players will discover wrecked beside the facility a century or more later, as rusting and abandoned as the colony ships still waiting on the Russian launch pads.

Maybe. *Destiny* lets you fill in the story blanks yourself, offering enough explicit and implicit clues to work out what went wrong



Joe Staten, *Destiny*'s creative lead and former writer and cinematic director on *Halo*

ALIEN DESIGN

For enemy AI to be considered successful at Bungie, they must be fun to fight again and again in isolation. Designers will fight a single, endlessly respawning enemy inside a test environment until behaviours are perfected. Tactics applicable to *Halo* will be useful in *Destiny*, from stealth and preparation to simply sitting out the fight and allowing two alien factions to fight each other. Many of *Destiny*'s factions are at odds with each other, united only by their distaste for humanity's presence on the worlds they claim.

Every player has their own ship but exactly how the craft will fit in, whether as a mission launchpoint or something with greater import, has yet to be revealed







ABOVE LEFT **The Traveler hangs in the sky above Earth's last human city.** ABOVE RIGHT **One of the residents of the lands outside the city, and another mystery that was introduced by Bungie's E3 trailer. Blue skin comes as standard for Awoken humans**

but enough empty space to leave room for conjecture. "We're always trying to imbue these places with all kinds of interesting questions, and a lot of them we won't answer," says art director **Chris Barrett**. "How did those cars get there? Why are they there? Where were they going? You have to think [like] you're a viewer with a painting: they're asking their own questions, telling their own story. That's more powerful than us being explicit about what something is and why. Those kinds of moments raise questions about the world that we can potentially pay off five years from now when you've revisited that space. Planting those seeds – that's really exciting for us, I think."

As the fireteam heads inside the facility, they're each fed story information by their own AI guide: a flying 'Ghost' voiced by Peter Dinklage, more than a little reminiscent of *Halo*'s own 343 Guilty Spark. Firefights with The Fallen – essentially space pirates – culminate in a battle against a Fallen leader named Rixus. Each player is rewarded with a unique weapon, and a door then opens onto an outdoor space where a 'public event' ensues, with multiple fireteams snatched into the game to take on an incoming Fallen strike force fronted by a Devil Walker tank. Shootings and explosions ensue – OK, what just happened?

"Public events are cyclical," Staten says. "They will happen regularly. If you visit a spot on Cosmodrome you'll [get the idea] that an event is going to happen after a set amount of time. Each of them will be themed specifically for that local space or for a larger destination. We really want to use public events to slam together people who wouldn't ordinarily run into each other. Different classes, levels, interests, smaller groups, fireteams... These public events are meant to collide lots of different players around a core, short nugget of fun. They're very local, very opportunistic, and you don't need to do any complicated joining to do them. You could hang out and enjoy them again and again and again – forever, I guess."

"WE WANT TO USE PUBLIC EVENTS TO SLAM TOGETHER PEOPLE WHO WOULDN'T RUN INTO EACH OTHER"

Public events are just one way players will collide. Friends joining your fireteam will arrive with a spectacular flyby from their personal spacecraft; outsiders will spawn out of sight, waiting to be discovered as you turn the next corner. Spaces go from public to private – places where matchmaking happens and outsiders appear, and spaces where only you and your friends can go, where story is told and loot is secreted.

"In general, when you come into an area that's open to the sky, that's the visual language that'll let you know this is a space where you'll encounter other players," Barrett says. "We're still in pre-alpha, figuring out the right UI elements to call out for all of these things. We're trying to find the right visual language that leads to players understanding the pace of their social and solo experiences. If we're in a game together and you run off to a private area, I can't follow you unless I join up with you. We're playtesting a lot at the studio right now, and we argue about it: 'Are [those transitions] called out well to the player?'"

Crucially, these are maps wide enough for you to encounter players passing through on

ORIGINS



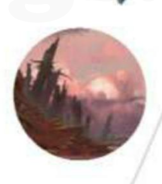
Bungie COO **Pete Parsons** was on hand the day *Destiny* was introduced to the studio. "About 20 people knew about it by the time that happened [in August 2009]," he says. "We'd been working on it for quite a while already. Jason [Jones, Bungie founder] had it in his mind for a long time, just working with [Chris] Butcher, and then we built it up. So Joe came out originally and talked about the backstory, and then Jason [explained] the seven pillars [seven design concepts that inform every aspect of the design] to the team. And then Joe came back out and dropped the f-bomb about 30 times during a story to highlight what the 50 minutes of gameplay would be like.

"Butcher spoke about how we were going to pull that off, and [Chris] Barrett discussed how we were going to explore the visual language of the game, Hao [Chen, senior graphics engineer] came out and gave us an expletive-laden vision of why it was going to be such a beautiful place to be in. And then other [people] came out and talked about characters and so on, and by the end of it, it all seemed like it might be possible.

"Top people in their fields were crazy enough to join us without knowing what *Destiny* was. I would take them into a room on the first day, and they would sit down and watch all of these videos; and often their first reaction was, 'If we can pull even half of this off, it's going to be the game I've always wanted to play.'"

Would it have been possible to make *Destiny* with Microsoft? "Yeah," Parsons says. "We weren't desperate to get out of the last [contract]. We enjoyed working on *Halo*. We got to walk away as an independent company with our technology, fanbase and all of our talent, and we decided what we wanted to do was spend years building a universe that people put on the same shelf as Star Wars or Lord Of The Rings. It was great that a number of publishers had wanted to do the same thing with us, but Activision truly did believe in that vision, and they're focused on putting it in as many hands as possible.

"From Activision's perspective it's like, 'We're a business, we have a responsibility to our shareholders, we want to be a great entertainment company,' and I think they're all of those things. And we think of ourselves as storytellers, and as a storyteller, what's better than an audience? A huge audience! So that works out really well."

"IF YOU'RE AT A DESTINATION FOR AN HOUR OR SO, I'D IMAGINE THAT YOU'D RUN INTO 50-100 PLAYERS"

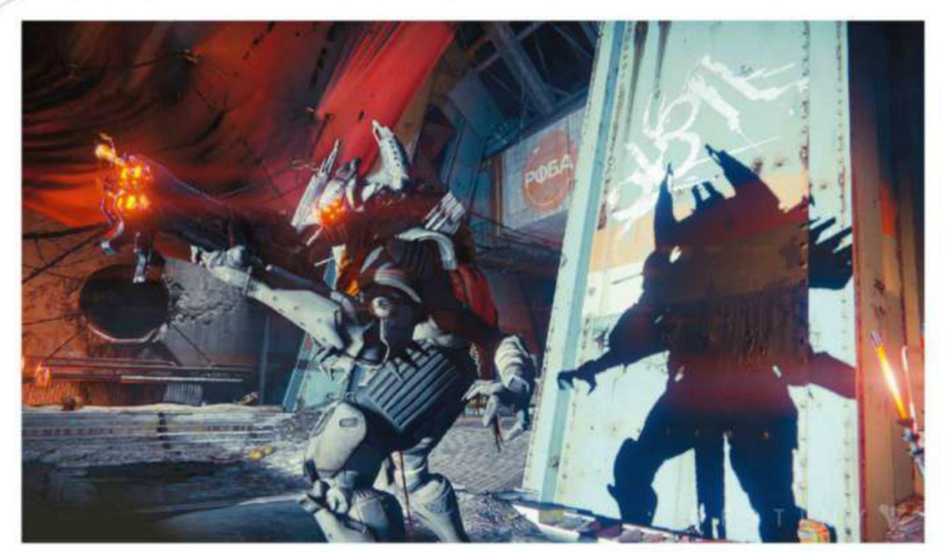
entirely different quests. "Sometimes a map is half a kilometre across, sometimes it's up to our engine maximum right now: two square kilometres," technical art director **Ryan Ellis** says. "And that's really big, especially for the kind of intricate combat and exploration we want to do. You will walk around in this world – sometimes directed, sometimes open – and discover things too strong for you, and doors you can't open. You'll find things that tell you, 'Behind me, there's something incredible, but you can't get through me today. You've got to go do something else first.' We want that experience of a temporary stop to be one that energises players to make themselves stronger. They know how to cross that door; they can peer beyond it and know the reward is worth it."

"I wouldn't say every space is like a hub with spokes off it," technical director **Chris Butcher** says. "We think of them as having circulation patterns. There are many reasons you might go there, whether it's a particular story mission, to gather resources, whatever. Players will constantly cross paths. Making sure we don't split up our population into different shards or servers means we're pretty sure there's always going to be a population, no matter where you go. If you look at concurrency counts – which are in the hundreds of thousands to millions for games of the size and scale that we think *Destiny* is going to be – there's always going to be players if you go somewhere. If you're at a destination for an hour or so, I'd imagine that you'd run into 50–100 players."

This alone makes *Destiny*'s world feel populated like an MMORPG, but it's a term Bungie avoids in favour of 'shared world'. "At E3 we showed seven players onscreen at once," Butcher says. "We're not talking final numbers yet, but what's important to realise is that because it's a firstperson shooter, even if we could do 100 players in a single area, we probably wouldn't because it wouldn't be fun. The number of players you can have in your fireteam is three.

"I imagine we could do more than that, but doing more tends to lead to a social dynamic where you just kind of turn into a mob: running through, shooting everything in your path, sprinting to the end of whatever you're doing. The term we use for that around here is 'clown town'."

The Russian launch base is occupied by a crew from The Fallen's House of Devils. The once-proud race is now a ragtag army of scavengers, joining creatures from across the galaxy – hulking Cabal, Hive space zombies, and time-travelling Vex – to roam Earth



VISIONS



Destiny's Earth is a world filled with futuristic versions of existing human technologies, and alien aberrations whose strangeness is magnified by the setting. Strangest of all is The Traveler – the colossal alien sphere protecting humanity's last city from attack – and its design went through a number of iterations. "We knew we needed this hub where players would go to after each adventure," says art director **Chris Barrett**. "But we went back and forth: 'Is it a station in space? Is it orbiting around Earth? Is it just a regular city?' But the visuals tell the story, and that visual – when you put the thing that's not supposed to be there against the familiar – it just kind of clicks. Bringing the familiar and the unfamiliar together is such a big part of the entire game; you're visiting the ruins of humanity, these places you've never been before. There's this buried city on Mars, it's human, but it's on Mars... that juxtaposition is key."

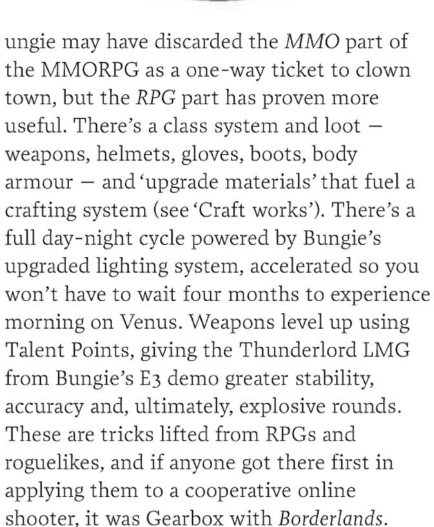
Barrett clearly relishes the possibilities offered by *Destiny*'s universe and its modular structure that allows for artistic and technical whims to be indulged. "One of the things that happened with *Halo* is that, when we started developing the storyline, we started locking ourselves into certain stories that we had to tell," Barrett says. "So we'd have an idea and it was always like, 'Oh, that isn't in canon' or 'That doesn't go with what we did in the last game'.

"This time, we wanted to create a world where lots of stories were possible so that anything can happen. We can pull something from another dimension and have it floating over Brazil, or we could open up a strange warp gate in space and have aliens pouring through. Any crazy idea that we come up with, we can put in there – that's super exciting. Nebular clouds around the moon? That's OK in our universe, and we don't necessarily have to explain why that is; let's just do it because it works."

Will Bungie look to replicate real human landmarks in *Destiny*? "Yes, I think it's something we will definitely play with," Barrett says. "It can be a [bad thing], like people are going to expect certain things – 'That doesn't feel like downtown Manhattan; that's not where Canal Street is' – but of course there's the scene in Planet Of The Apes with the Statue of Liberty coming out of the sand: that's hugely powerful. There are definitely things like that we'll play with from a mood standpoint."



Players can choose to play as Humans, Awoken or Exo – a jack-of-all-trades soldier, a fragile Elven magic user or a cyborg tank respectively





Bungie may have discarded the *MMO* part of the MMORPG as a one-way ticket to clown town, but the *RPG* part has proven more useful. There's a class system and loot – weapons, helmets, gloves, boots, body armour – and 'upgrade materials' that fuel a crafting system (see 'Craft works'). There's a full day-night cycle powered by Bungie's upgraded lighting system, accelerated so you won't have to wait four months to experience morning on Venus. Weapons level up using Talent Points, giving the Thunderlord LMG from Bungie's E3 demo greater stability, accuracy and, ultimately, explosive rounds. These are tricks lifted from RPGs and roguelikes, and if anyone got there first in applying them to a cooperative online shooter, it was Gearbox with *Borderlands*.

"We are absolutely doing things that would be familiar if you've played any kind of open-world game," Staten says. "I mean... *Far Cry*, even. We would be idiots if we didn't look at an awesome game like *Borderlands* and ask, 'What are they doing well and how can we try to hit that same ball?' I have never played a game where I have such a great attachment to my gun as I do in *Borderlands*.

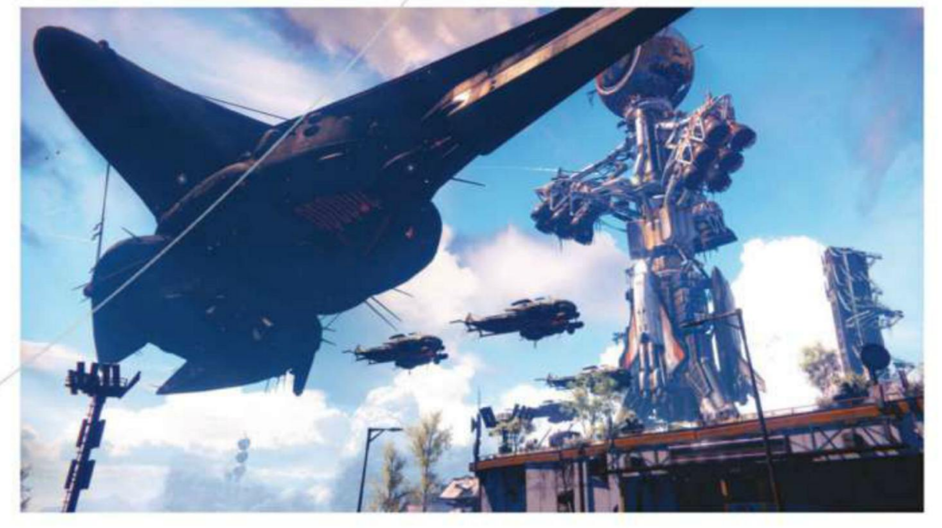
"When we look at a game like that, we look at the things they're doing well and also at opportunities they might have missed that we can capitalise on. You can party up with a group of people and then go around with that group, but never in *Borderlands* are you going to collide with a group of other people doing it too. We don't do that just once or twice in the game, we do that all the time, everywhere. You see other people on the horizon, hear gunfire over a hill and see space magic flying behind some trees, and you know... there are other people out here, that [changes everything]. *Borderlands* right now is: 'I'm going to walk into that space and we're going to clear them out and keep going'. And frankly that's not just *Borderlands*, that's any co-op shooter."

Staten includes *Halo* among that count. *Destiny* is, for now, unique within its genre. There are parallels with *Dark Souls'* ambient multiplayer, and *Journey* tried something similar on a smaller scale, but for now *Destiny* stands alone among shooters, and in playtests that unique element has made all the difference. "I was fighting with a boss and having a hard time because it was just me,

CRAFT WORKS

Bungie won't be drawn further on *Destiny's* crafting system, except to say that staff have "very intentionally" shown off *Destiny's* weapons and gear from a "high altitude". Bungie's PR adds that they specifically didn't tab over to the inventory screen in their E3 gameplay demo, where "you might find evidence of those sorts of systems – not that we're confirming anything, of course". Elsewhere, engineering lead Chris Butcher mentions retrieving "upgrade materials" from chests, which suggests a robust crafting system that will safeguard *Destiny's* more exotic weapons and artefacts.





In the public event featured in Bungie's E3 demo, wave after wave of Fallen arrive via dropship and are swiftly followed by a tank; it's an event that would be familiar to any *Halo* player

CLASS WAR

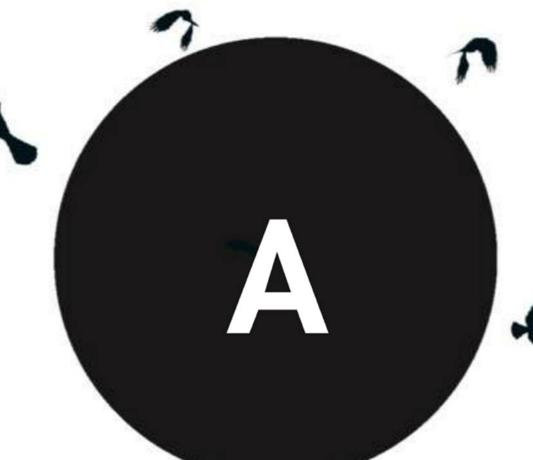
Bungie is still experimenting with specific class 'verbs' – powers and abilities that distinguish one class from another beyond the simple stat differences governing resistance and magic use. Among those verbs is the Warlock's glide ability, demonstrated on Sony's stage at E3, which functions in a similar manner to *Reach*'s jetpack, and places the Warlock high above the battlefield where his Nova Bomb is most effective. Other classes' abilities are works in progress, and all of them can be modified and customised based on player preference.

alone," Ellis says. "Just as I was about to bypass this guy and continue with my story mission, two people from a random fireteam in the studio showed up with rocket launchers and took this guy out. I still got the rewards from doing it because I was involved in the battle, but the boss went down because people I don't even really know helped me. That's what everybody's going to be experiencing multiple times as they play through, many, many more times over when there are [hundreds of thousands of players]."

"The thing that really surprises me now is the first time we got public events, public spaces and matchmaking working it felt so novel because we'd never seen that before in a shooter," Staten says. "Those early experiences when you run into your first other person, you were just so happy you'd met another real person out in the world… But that happens so often now that you just accept it, and it's only when it's gone you really miss it.

"I was playing the game at home with my son when we were switching out our builds and taking the servers offline, and we were walking around and he said, 'Dad, where are all the people?' This is an 11-year-old kid who wants nothing more than to play shooters, and this is the one shooter he gets to play because I can sit there with him, and the moment he realised it didn't have any other people in it he decided to go to bed. We *must* be on to something. There's a vast, untapped desire people have to experience adventure with other human beings and to be part of a larger world, and if we capture any of that in this game I'll be very proud of us. I think it would be something really special."













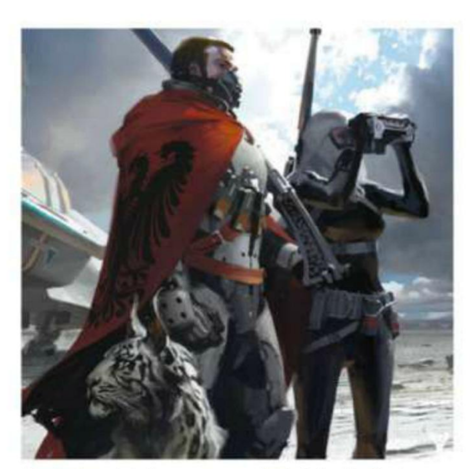
A

s the first outside of Bungie to play *Destiny* – or at least the first able to report on the experience – it feels exactly like that most reductive of descriptions: *Halo* with iron sights. Our character, a level 7 Warlock, even has a glide ability similar to *Halo: Reach*'s jetpack. L1 tosses a Solar Flare grenade, R1 melee strikes, both together unleash the Warlock's Nova Bomb space magic, and all of it makes for a perfect *Halo*-esque 30 seconds of fun – or maybe it was 90 seconds in our brief play. *Destiny* is perhaps a little smoother, maybe a little faster, certainly much prettier and more believable as a location on Earth, but here at Bungie with the servers disconnected it is *Halo* with an iron sight, with all the good things that implies.

Here, *Destiny* becomes *Destiny* only when you tap the D-pad – Up to wave, Down to dance, Left to salute, Right to point. Those gestures hint at a world based on interaction with friends and strangers, where meetings might be so fleeting that a player would need gestures available beneath their thumb without context menus or selection wheels getting in the way. In seven hours, the time it took to finish *Halo 3*, you will meet and build a character of your own, see just a fragment of the massive universe Bungie is creating, and maybe fight alongside 700 different players, all exploring the world with their own agenda. For now, even with the servers on, wandering *Destiny*'s world with total impunity isn't an option. Journeying to a destination is mission-driven – "but that's something we were discussing in a design meeting right before I walked in here to talk to you", says Staten. "We're not convinced that's a great player experience; maybe we want to give you a bit more focus and direction – those are things we're actively debating right now. But I will say this: we've already revealed public events. If there were a way for you to get back to a destination, if you wanted to, you could spend eternity going around this destination just hitting public events, meeting new people, running into little pockets of enemies, getting loot, levelling up your weapon. You could spend as much time as you could physically handle just travelling around."

In the absence of free roam, there are multiple entries into *Destiny*'s destinations long after the story is over. "The first thing you're going to do is play this great story," Staten says. "And, as you play through the story, there'll be times when we say: 'The

"THERE'S A VAST, UNTAPPED DESIRE PEOPLE HAVE TO EXPERIENCE ADVENTURE WITH OTHER HUMAN BEINGS"



Physics-based cloth was an essential to bring Destiny's artwork to life. What's more, Bungie's new engine had to handle those physics on current-generation platforms

CONNECTIONS



Ask around Bungie and Microsoft, and the staff there will tell you that engineering lead **Chris Butcher** was responsible for much of what Xbox Live is today. The standards set by *Halo 2* became the baseline for entry in the shooter space, and today few videogames ship without some kind of matchmaking system that lets parties jump from game to game. But for Butcher, *Destiny* was an even greater challenge than *Halo*.

"From an engineering perspective there has been a tonne of problems to solve," he says. "We want to make this experience invisible to the player. These social spaces won't feel natural if you ever have to worry about host migration or NAT problems. If you play *Reach*, there are many layers of networking but you're engaging with them actively so you can see what's going wrong; when that's not visible to you, you can't build a mental model and so it has to just work.

"The hardest problem has been taking every single edge case you find with online multiplayer gaming today, coming up with technical solutions for all of them and getting a 100 per cent seamless experience. We've built an entire system that sits in the cloud, so if two players can't talk to each other it will act as a middleman and route traffic between them – at pretty sizeable cost to us in terms of complexity, engineering resources, bandwidth – but no player will ever know that system is even there."

But an always-online social shooter creates further problems. "We have to make sure that, if certain players aren't cooperating or communicating effectively, it doesn't ruin anyone else's experience,"he says. "So, for example, you're not going to be in an open voice channel with the people that just matched in with you. We all know what that would be like, so instead we give players the means to express – at no cost to themselves – the fact that they're interested in socialising with someone.

"If all you could do was run up to people and say 'Invite to fireteam?' and they're like 'Accept: yes or no?', then that creates a huge barrier. You know what it's like to put yourself out there and then be rejected, so we have non-verbal interactions: salutes, waves, [ways of] saying thanks. Making sure that those are always available to you, and that they're quick to get to, means you can create these moments of connection within the game world."









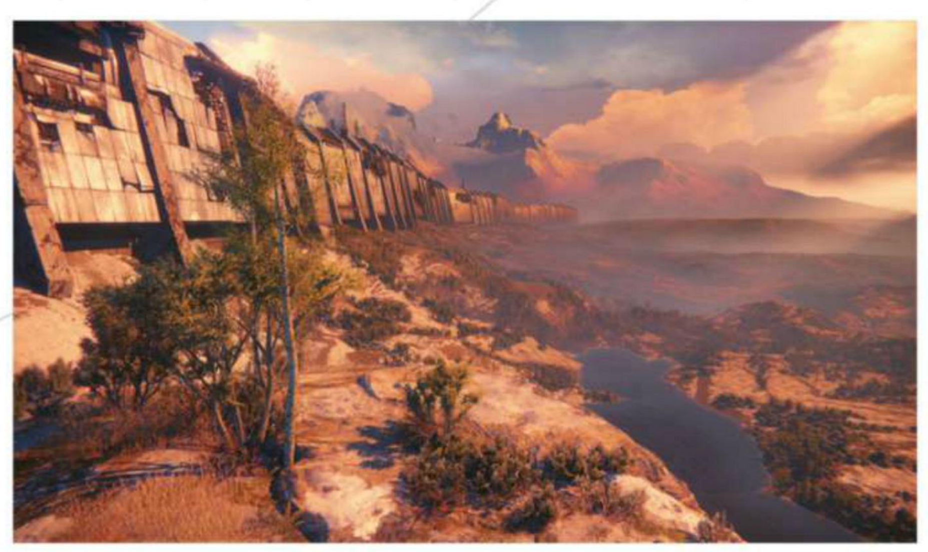
DESTINY IS BUILT TO BE PLAYED IN PERPETUITY – BUNGIE REFERS TO IT AS A HOBBY IN ITS OWN RIGHT

next story chapter? It's there for you, don't worry, but before you get there can you make a choice about one of these activities?' It'll be some little objective. We'll expose you to other kinds of play, other activities, and when you come back to *Destiny* there are some more of those little bright lights you saw before. That's how we approach it: expose [players] to the choice early, have enough of those choices to hopefully sustain the community between basic story missions. Then when people complete the story it's like, 'Hey, it's one of those little things I did! There's a bunch of them! And, holy shit, they come with loads of cool rewards? And there's one that's even better every week? That sounds awesome!'"

***Destiny* is built** to be played in perpetuity – so much so that Bungie refers to the game as a hobby in its own right. Over eight years, Bungie will produce four games and four substantial DLC updates, but there is no ending sitting in some file on Bungie's servers or even a detailed plan for what happens next, only a universe that allows many stories to be told. "The big lesson [from *Halo*] is: if you don't have a plan for the future, you're scrambling to catch up with your own success," Staten says. "This time we're planning for success, and that's enabled us to imagine a future where many things are possible. It allows the plot a long arc, which is great. In *Halo* we certainly didn't have that. We planned for an eight-hour experience then, two years later, figured out another eight-hour experience. This time we're thinking about how you grow and evolve this world over many years, many hours. It's a whole different mindset.

"I think this is the next step. There is always a place for beautifully crafted, solitary narratives. How could they die? You play a game like *The Last Of Us* and you go, 'This is amazing – can I have another one? Oh, shit, I have to wait three years...' But from our point of view it's clearly the next logical – no, emotional, visceral – evolution, and once you get a taste of it, you'll look back and go, 'Pfft, why would I spend any time in a world that doesn't have any other people in it? It'd be so empty, lonely, it wouldn't be any fun.' I believe that's going to happen when people play this game. Hopefully... I guess if they don't think that, we'll have to do something else." ■

Using their new Grognok level editor, Bungie's level designers can quickly build detailed environments, raising mountains, carving ravines and slotting structures together like virtual Lego even before the level's artists have begun their work



GENERATIONS

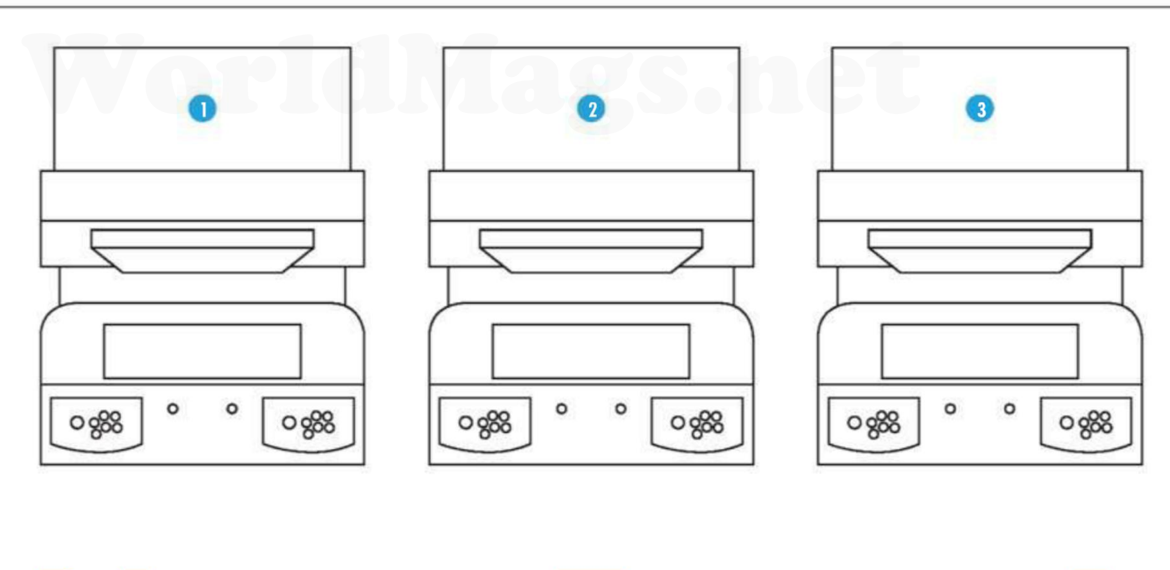


Destiny has been developed with 360 and PS3 as the benchmark, and there is little in the PS4 and Xbox One builds that players won't find in the current-generation versions. Both generations have the same maps and matchmaking systems, 360 and PS3 have realtime lighting and physics-based cloth just like the next-gen versions, and two players can walk to opposite ends of the map and stay connected on all platforms ("one of the major technological challenges we had to address," says engineering lead Chris Butcher).

The next-generation upgrades are cosmetic. "Of course they'll look a lot better being in 1080p with higher-res textures, more geometry and things like that," says technical art director **Ryan Ellis**. "But we we're building it to scale. To be honest, the limit was us saying, 'Well, we probably don't want to build anything much bigger than this'. Because of the way our streaming engine works, it wasn't really a generational concern. It was more about making the right decision for what makes a fun game and a fun space to play in. We're not making different content. We're making the same thing for 360, PS3 and then it looks better by virtue of the engine improving itself automatically. We want the experience to be as good as possible [on 360 and PS3], so we made a conscious decision to target those for gameplay, world scale and universe design."

Bungie's new engine lets the studio do "a lot of things," Ellis says. "But mainly it allows us to really focus on building a big, interactive world. To build a mesa, for example, takes a couple of seconds. Things our art team are used to doing, we can do directly in our tools and export it directly into our engine. It calculates all the pathfinding and collision automatically so there's little to no work for the content team to make those things happen. Building big spaces that have multiple entrances and exits is definitely a new focus for us and this new engine and new tools allow us to develop those things quicker, and experiment and rearrange."

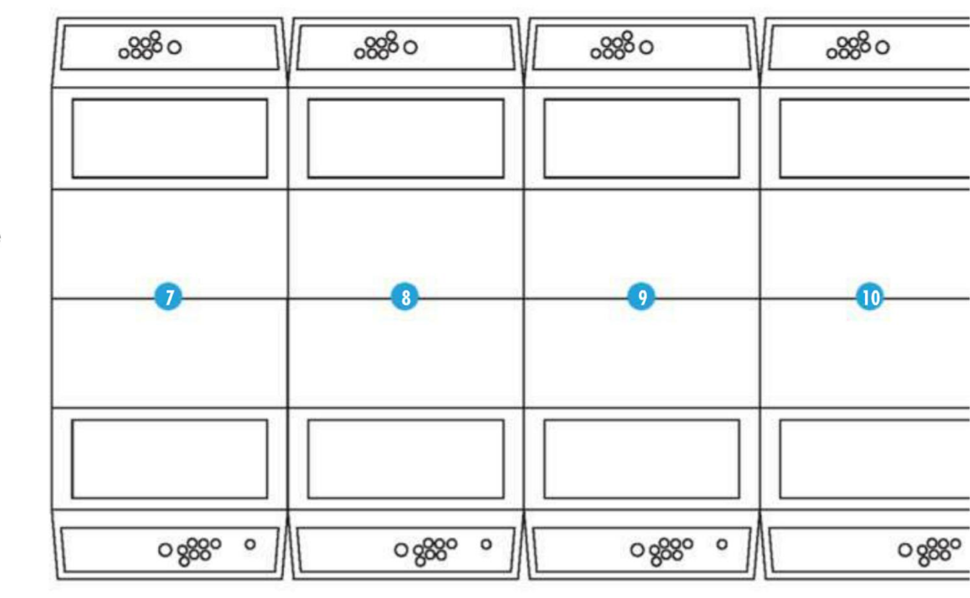
When *Destiny 2* arrives in 2016, it will almost certainly skip 360 and PS3 altogether, giving the universe incredible opportunity for expansion even beyond its current sweeping goals – although, Ellis says, "If people are still buying things [by that point] on 360 and PS3, we're going to treat those as just as high priority as we ever have. We'll make those decisions when we need to."



H E A

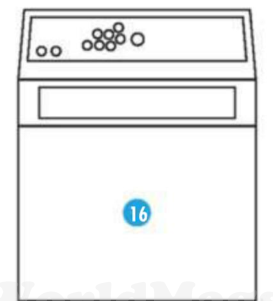
Visitors to The Heart Of Gaming face a fighting-heavy assortment of coin-op attractions comprising:

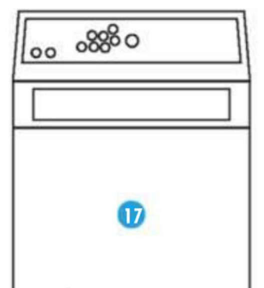
1 Guilty Gear Accent Core
2 Fist Of The North Star
3 Killer Instinct 2
4 Capcom Vs SNK 2
5 Tekken Tag Tournament 2 (on Xbox 360)
6 Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition 2012 (on Xbox 360)
7 King Of Fighters '98
8 Street Fighter Alpha 2
9 Super Street Fighter II Turbo
10 Super Street Fighter II Turbo
11 Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike
12 Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike
13 Gauntlet Legends
14 Donkey Kong
15 Donkey Kong
16 Shikigami No Shiro 2
17 Ikaruga
18 Puzzle Bobble 2
19 Metal Slug 3
20 Giga Wing Generations
21 Strikers 1945

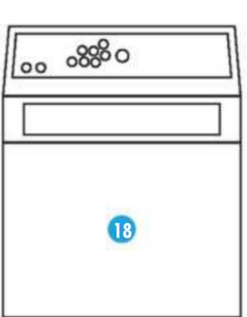


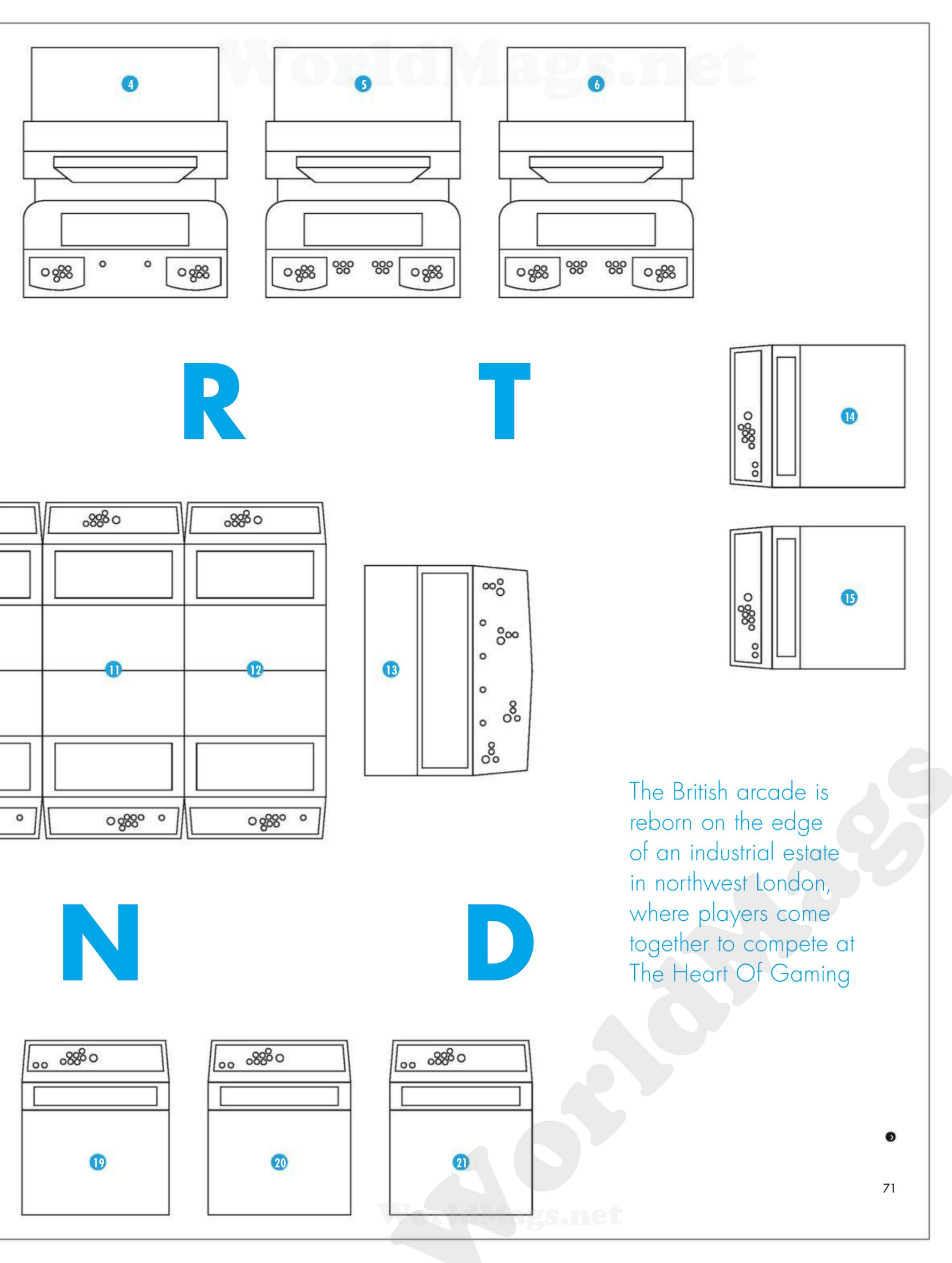
L A











The British arcade is reborn on the edge of an industrial estate in northwest London, where players come together to compete at The Heart Of Gaming


1
2
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MANZ
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50p

1 **Mark Starkey**
Active in the amusement industry since 1993, Starkey is a long-time arcade gamer. "It's always been a passion," he says. "I used to have a smaller place in Potters Bar. We thought, if people are prepared to travel to somewhere as random as Potters Bar outside of London, if we give them somewhere bigger and closer to London, it's got to work."

2 **Joff Keerie**
"He's the backbone," says Starkey. "Without him, the place would not be here. He's the guy that takes on everything physical: redecoration, renovation, driving, all that kind of stuff. All the times we've had to pick up machines, do agonising trips, hauling stuff backwards and forwards, it was this guy."

3 **Simeon Lansiquot**
Lansiquot founded Neo Empire alongside Starkey as a community site for fighting gamers. "When the arcades shut down, we lost touch with a lot of friends," he explains. "The arcade scene was really bad, so we used it to bring all of the players together. I don't want people to walk in here and think this is a business; I want people to walk in here and think that this is their home."

That so many have discovered London's most innovative arcade is testament to the dedication of the city's gamers. From North Acton tube – as far as you can go before leaving Zone 2 and cutting deeper into your Oyster card balance – it's a walk along an unmarked road and then left into an industrial park. You zigzag for ten minutes past builders' yards and a half-dozen garages until eventually you end up on the edge of a tumbledown housing estate. Incongruously tucked away atop a flight of stone steps, with lights flickering dimly from behind frosted windows, is The Heart Of Gaming.

"As soon as we opened the door to this place, we were like, 'Eugh!'" founder **Mark Starkey** says. "The whole front room was divided into four, with a corridor running down the middle. You couldn't explain any of this architectural monstrosity. There was wiring everywhere, no heating, and the whole ceiling was asbestos. It made no sense, so we asked, 'Who was here before?' The guy said, 'The last owner was renting it out to illegal immigrants, then two of them got into a fight and started a fire.' And apparently it all just unravelled, so the chap was practically giving it away. That's the benefit of being slightly outside central London. Yes, you might have to travel an extra ten or 15 minutes to get here, but out here we can rent a decent venue and give people an arcade that hopefully isn't going to close down in a couple of months. It's just that you've got to know about it or be curious enough to check it out." And people are.

Already rechristened 'The Hog' by regulars, The Heart of Gaming is run by the trio of amusement industry veteran Starkey, PR man Simeon Lansiquot and manager Joff Keerie. The arcade scene brought Starkey and Lansiquot together, and the pair witnessed its death throes first hand. "I remember how much it hurt when Namco Wonderpark closed down," says Lansiquot sadly. "It didn't hurt on the day it closed – it hurt the next Friday, the day we would all go down to the arcade, and we all just thought, 'What are we going to do today?'"

When the expansive arcade in central London's Trocadero finally shut its doors after years of decrepitude, the future crew of The Hog saw an opportunity to pick up the torch. "I thought, this is our chance," Starkey says. "It was our shot to take what's left of a decaying industry, mix it with what people want to see today, tidy it up, and get everyone enjoying offline gaming again." The three swooped in, picking up dozens of old arcade cabinets and bar stools for a song. For anyone who spent time in the Trocadero in its heyday, gaming in The Hog is an eerily familiar sensation, but while many of the cabinets and the furniture are the same, the team's approach to running it is markedly different to your traditional arcade.

"There are lots of reasons why the arcade scene failed, but it was the failure to adapt from the whole coin-operated thing that really killed it," Starkey says. "Nobody's going to come out of their house to pay 50p, £1 or £2 a go on a machine any more; it's a lot easier to just go home, turn on your PS3 and play online. But if you can give someone an entire day's worth of gaming for a set sum, you're giving them value for money and letting them play with friends at their leisure." Instead of milking players one pound at a time, The Hog's pricing is more straightforward: pay £10 on the door, and then play as much as you like until the doors close after midnight. "You could play for less than a pound an hour. You can't get into an Internet cafe for less than that. We are purposefully making it affordable," Starkey explains.

And The Hog's solution does more than make arcade gaming affordable: it makes it safe. "The arcade scene that we knew doesn't really exist any more," says Lansiquot. "People used to go to an arcade and try a bit of everything, but now you have *Guilty Gear* players, *Street Fighter* players, *King Of Fighters* players, *Virtua Fighter* players, and the scene has split. When they walk in











When The Hog went shopping for arcade machines, they returned with six back-to-back Versus City cabinets, eight Sega Naomi machines and six sit-down Naomi Deluxe units. A *Gauntlet Legends* machine acts as a bookend, and the arcade's newest acquisition – a dance cabinet – sits in an adjoining room. There are always casualties, though, as the unwanted parts languishing in the 'graveyard' can attest











The Heart Of Gaming's gamelist goes well beyond the confines of the cabinets, with games such as (from top) *Vampire Savior, Puzzle Bobble 2, Pac-Man, Metal Slug* and *Rival Schools 2*. The Naomi DX machines support *Virtua Fighter 5, Yatagarasu, Akatsuki Blitzkampf* and countless Xbox fighters, while the smaller oneplayer Naomi machines will even run ancient *Donkey Kong* boards

here, they go around trying other games again. That's what this is about. You can try new things without worrying about wasting your money."

Aside from removing the coin mechanisms, the cabinets have been retooled by Starkey to be more versatile and support modern demands. Several now house Xbox 360s and flatscreen HDTVs, turning console-exclusive fighters like *Injustice: Gods Among Us* into working, 'as good as the real thing' arcade machines. Two machines in the main room are mongrel cabinets built from discarded parts – cabinets dragged from skips, old CRT monitors and circuit boards scavenged from broken machines. They've been lovingly cleaned, sanded and resprayed and now sit proudly among the Trocadero rescuees.

Upright Sega Naomi cabinets now house original *Donkey Kong* boards, and other machines have been rewired to make The Hog the only venue in Britain streaming live fighting game tournaments every week. In the back, Xbox 360s and PS3s sit atop office tables beside Trocadero chairs, and an *In The Groove/Dance Dance Revolution* twin setup has been embraced by London's *DDR* community. Up front The Hog has curiosities like PC-exclusive Japanese indie fighter *Yatagarasu* running on modified cabinets alongside *Street Fighter III, Rival Schools 2, King Of Fighters* and whatever else players request that day. "We want to build up a big selection of software that we can change on request," Starkey says. "We already have about 20 games there's just no room for, so we've rebuilt the machines and can change the software on request. That's not really something any arcade in the UK has ever offered before."

"We try to cater for everybody," says PR **Simeon Lansiquot**. "We've got consoles so we can bring in the *Call Of Duty* guys, the *Halo* guys, *Gran Turismo*..." Could the Heart Of Gaming be a venue for publishers to show off new titles or for tournament organisers to host e-sports? "Definitely," Lansiquot says. "We've been talking about putting PCs in here so people could play team versus team. The e-sports scene is underdeveloped in this country but I've seen the energy that those guys bring, and this kind of environment is what's needed to help a scene grow. If you give everybody something new, they'll want to play because they see their friends playing it, and that's how the community grows. That's the point of this place: to build the community. We're doing everything we can; if this doesn't work, then nothing like this is ever going to work."

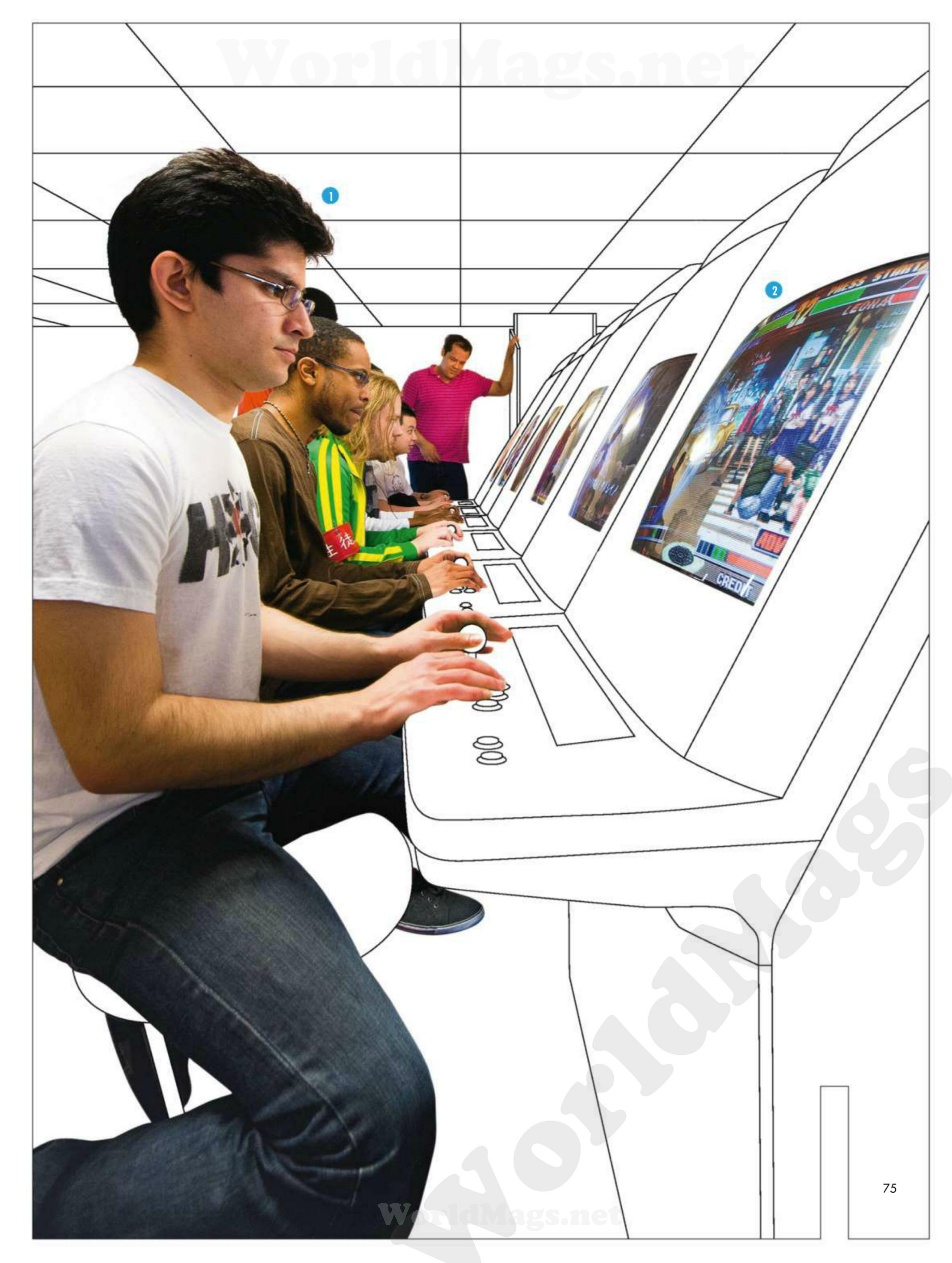
After months of renovation, The Heart Of Gaming opened for business in April. "There was a great turnout on the opening day – about 200 people," Starkey says, proudly. "The first Friday we had about 15, and now on a Friday we have around 40, with lots of regulars." And while The Hog is currently dominated by fighting games ("It's where we come from," says Lansiquot), the plan is to diversify and cater to every gaming taste – console shooter tournaments, arcade racing cabinets and PC LAN setups are all on the cards. The Hog is throwing everything into building its community, from opening at 4pm and staying open until midnight to discourage school truancy, to converting one of its offices into a prayer room for Muslim gamers when needed. During the May half-term school holiday, the arcade offered a week-long pass for £20, and Starkey is scouring eBay for games the regulars request – Neo Geo game *Windjammers* is currently at the top of his shopping list.

"We're always thinking, 'What can we do to get more attention, how can we get more people in here?'" he says. "We're working on some really creative angles for this place: we have a Twitch.tv channel, we want to have a radio station, a clothing range, an exchange shop, a sitcom, maybe even a film. We're even considering doing a Big Brother show." He gestures around The Hog. "This could easily be the Big Brother house for two weeks. We've got a toilet, a shower, a kitchen area, rooms that could have beds thrown in them..."

"We get 16 gamers, lock them up, close the door..." Lansiquot says. "And watch them tear themselves apart," Starkey cuts in, smiling. "People would do it, too. They're dedicated enough." ■

1 Local heroes
Most of The Heart Of Gaming's regulars hail from the fighting game scene, but competition has recently moved to the *Donkey Kong* machines at the back of the arcade, where players have grown so skilled, scores so high and play sessions so long that a second Naomi cabinet has had to be repurposed for yet more *Donkey Kong*

2 Competition rules
The Heart Of Gaming hosts regular fighting game tournaments, and thanks to Starkey's modifications, the linked Versus City cabinets can now stream live video straight to The Hog's Twitch.tv channel at www.twitch.tv/thewonderpark, named after the Namco Wonderpark that The Hog's team called home



1
2



REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

SpaceChem iOS
One of the few criticisms Zachtronics Industries' nuclear reactor simulator faced in our 2011 PC review was its lack of portability. So good was the (quite literally) core gameplay that not being able to tackle those open-ended puzzles on the hoof was frustrating. A *Candy Crush Saga*-induced sugar overdose recently sent us in search of something more substantial, and iPad *SpaceChem* filled the gap perfectly.

Limbo iOS
Playdead has spent over a year porting its haunting platform adventure to iOS, and it shows. The scourge of virtual controls is nowhere to be seen, instead replaced by a remarkably intuitive gesture system that fits so well it's easy to forget the game began life on other formats. We've missed the occasional jump through no fault of our own, but such lapses are easier to forgive when the game looks this good on iPad.

Persona 4 Golden Vita
Persona 4 was released on PS2 three years into the current generation's life, where it was ignored by players who should have been drawn to its fascinating fighting mechanics, ripping story and intricate art. Then the game was sent to its death for a second time on a handheld few own. But surprise: Vita is a natural home for *Persona 4*, and the perfect platform for dipping in and out, and devouring the monster narrative one small piece at a time.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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What's a decade between games?

Shigeru Miyamoto's justification for yet another delay to *The Legend Of Zelda: The Ocarina Of Time* is legend: "A delayed game is eventually good; a bad game is bad forever." The wait, however, was caused by Nintendo experimenting as it brought Link's adventures into three dimensions for the first time – Miyamoto originally wanted the game to be viewed from a firstperson perspective. But *The Ocarina Of Time*'s eventual quality meant Miyamoto would forever be cut some slack by fans awaiting instalments.

Pikmin 3 (p78) is appearing nine years on from its predecessor, and some 12 years after the GameCube original. That's longer than the seven years it took Miyamoto to turn *A Link To The Past* into *The Ocarina Of Time*, but despite the wait *Pikmin 3* is only a generational leap in terms of resolution. Luckily for Nintendo – and Wii U owners champing at the bit for new releases – *Pikmin 3*'s core design and buckets of charm mean it's been well worth the wait – even if cynics will take it as further evidence of Nintendo resting on creative laurels.

By contrast, *Dota 2* (p82) has been in almost constant development during its decade-long history, though its path has been more complex. What started as a mod for the *Warcraft III* map Defense Of The Ancients is now a standalone game – two, in fact, with *Warcraft* owner Blizzard making its own variant, *Dota Allstars*. *Dota 2* has been endlessly refined by hobbyist developers; IceFrog, the modder who spearheaded its development from 2005, was hired by Valve and he has at last brought it to version 1.0. The result is a fiercely complex MOBA with one of the steepest learning curves in all of videogames, one that will likely alienate more than it entrances. Perhaps there's something to be said for keeping it simple after all.



Pikmin 3

With a sparse release schedule and thirdparty support on the wane, it's once again down to firstparty games to revive a flagging Nintendo console. *Pikmin 3* may not be a system seller akin to the two *Mario* games that kickstarted 3DS's turnaround, but it does at least make convincing use of Wii U's controller – eventually, anyway. Those familiar with the Wii re-releases of the first two *Pikmin* games will likely opt to play with the Wii Remote and Nunchuk at first, but Nintendo would clearly prefer that you use the GamePad.

Doing so means losing a pointer but gaining camera control with the right analogue stick, and a left trigger lock-on does much to compensate for the loss of the Remote's finer aiming. Yet the real reason you're better off using Wii U's tablet controller is that you have to anyway, regardless of which control scheme you opt for: there's a GamePad replica in the game itself. Whenever one of *Pikmin 3*'s trio of protagonists pulls out their so-called KopPad – which they do frequently – you're prompted to look at yours, which feels much more natural when the GamePad's already in your hands.

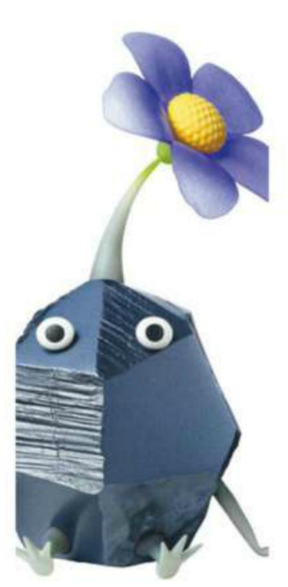
While the KopPad's hint-dropping data files and chats with fellow crew won't sell Wii U to the sceptical – and are visible on the big screen anyway – the map just might. It's a delight, helping you find wayward Pikmin in the pre-sunset scramble to reassemble your squad. It marks the location of fruit and treasures, a valuable aid in singleplayer that becomes positively game-breaking in *Pikmin 3*'s multiplayer mode, Bingo Battle. It lets you plan routes: mark a waypoint and a colleague will trot off automatically, squad of Pikmin in tow, and let you know they've arrived and are awaiting further instructions. It's a vital tool in a game in which you speedily micromanage not one but three squads. An automated helping hand is welcome indeed and, in the late game especially, frequently proves essential.

The three protagonists, while identical to control, change the pace of the game. In *Pikmin*s past, Olimar could set a gang of Pikmin to work on one task while taking another group elsewhere, but he'd always have to make time to return once the job was finished. Now you can keep a commander close by, instantly switching between them with a button press – and as such can, in theory, get three times the amount of work done before the sun sets. Fellow crew can be thrown onto ledges or across gaps – simple stuff at first, but before long you're dealing with seesaws and weighted platforms or flinging Pikmin and colleagues at bulbous mushroom trampolines from a lily pad. Leave a colleague near your home base, meanwhile, and they'll automatically pluck new Pikmin from the ground when they appear.

When new Pikmin turn up they don't just bring new puzzles, but personality too – a welcome change after two games of Olimar's blank canvas. Setting out in

Publisher Nintendo
Developer In-house
Format Wii U
Release Out now (EU), August 4 (US)

The map is a vital tool in a game in which you speedily micromanage not one but three squads



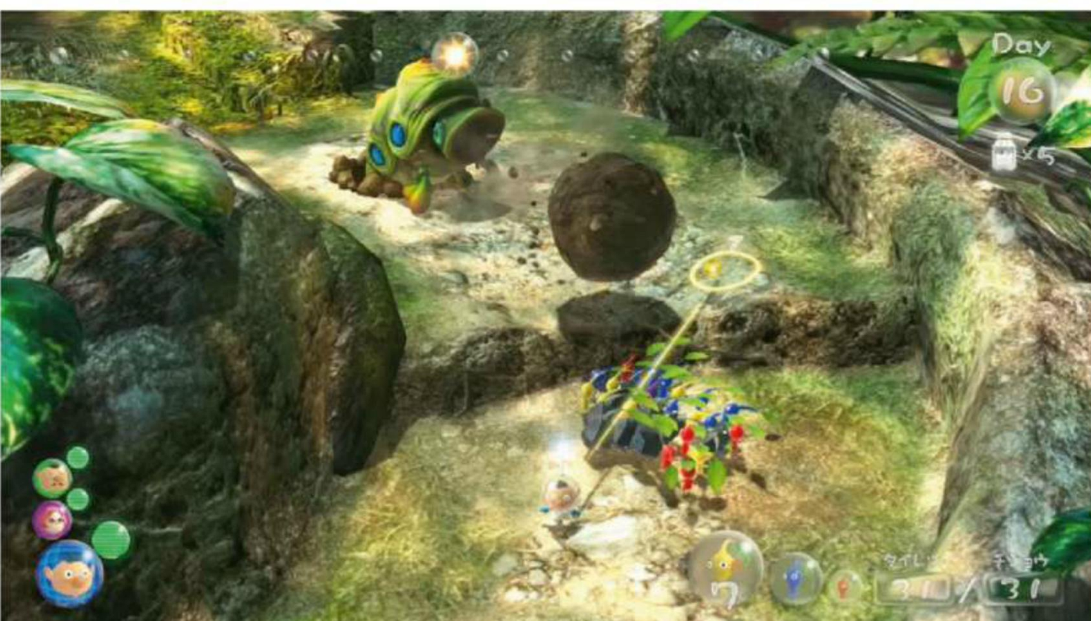
search of resources to save Koppai, their starving planet, our heroes discover the verdant planet PN-404 on the edge of the solar system. Their ship, the SS Drake, breaks apart on landing, scattering the trio across the planet's surface. You spend the early part of the game with Alph, a freckled, dopey-looking fellow who bears a passing resemblance to Olimar (who has a very different, although no less crucial, role to play here).

Alph soon links up with Brittany, a bespectacled redhead who spends her evenings fretting about the crew's meagre food stocks. Eventually you reunite with Charlie, the rotund, mohawked captain who's rather attached to his rubber ducky. It's all a far cry from Olimar's fretful logbook entries, with the team indulging in friendly banter during the day and writing their own journals at night. Alph pens clumsy poetry; Charlie stoically mourns the passing of lost Pikmin; Britanny, meanwhile, admits skewing the division of daily rations in her own favour.

Gathering enough food to keep you sustained and save your home planet is the main goal, and as such PN-404's abundant fruit takes the role of Olimar's missing ship parts, squirrelled away behind gates, enemies or environmental puzzles. And what fruit! This is lovingly rendered stuff: ripe, plump and brightly coloured. Good enough to eat? This is good enough to save a planet, and the best-looking thing in the game too. While the shift to HD is clearly a gigantic leap forward from the blurry GameCube originals, ground textures are flat and muddy looking. Leaves and plants in the background have been afforded the same production values as fruit, but it's disappointing that PN-404's one constant, the ground beneath your feet, is the worst-looking thing in a very pretty game.

Despite the increase in poly counts and protagonists, there are just five varieties of the floral-headed supporting cast in Story mode. There's the series stalwart Reds, Yellows and Blues, plus two new types. (*Pikmin 2*'s Whites and Purples appear only in Mission mode.) The pink Winged Pikmin specialise in pulling things up, lifting gates and uprooting Flukeweed, rosy-hued plants that hold treats inside their tightly wound coils. Their slender forms limit their damage output but they're handy in battle, especially against the spiders that shrug other Pikmin off their backs and straight into webs below. Bulky, angular Rock Pikmin, meanwhile, can one-shot many enemies if they strike from above, break through crystal barriers, and can't be squashed. All five can be briefly powered up by juice from spicy berries, but the new additions don't change the feel and flow of the game in any meaningful way – certainly not to the extent of the three protagonists.

Largely, this is a sequel that seeks to refine rather than reinvent. There's now just the one Onion – the



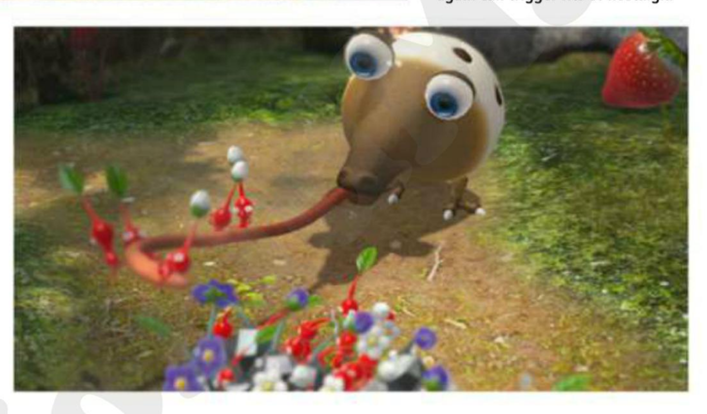
ABOVE While you spend your first days on PN-404 controlling Alph, you're briefly introduced to moustachioed Charlie at the outset. These mushrooms are some of the earliest obstructions you'll face and are easily dealt with – short work for a small group of Pikmin.

LEFT Whenever you see a ledge, you know you're going to need to use two or more commanders. These beasts spew boulders down a fixed path until you get too close, at which point they'll turn around and start shooting straight at you

BELOW Losing Pikmin is as heartbreaking as ever. The music that plays every evening as your gains and losses are displayed is the same as before, too; hearing it again can trigger fits of nostalgia



ABOVE Rock Pikmin are your only way through these crystal barriers. While most Pikmin will stick to a surface, Rocks bounce off, falling flat on their backsides before getting up and flinging themselves at their target again



bulbous organism in which Pikmin are produced and spend the night – rather than one for each colour, saving you valuable seconds when assembling your squad at the start of the day. Send a small squad to strip a bunch of grapes, or to transport a pile of rubble to rebuild a broken bridge, and they'll head back and forth automatically until the job is completed. Accidentally guiding the wrong Pikmin through water, fire or electricity no longer spells doom: instead they become panicked, and will calm down and rejoin the squad if you're quick to your whistle. Tap left or right on the D-pad, meanwhile, and your Pikmin will roll to the side – an invaluable aid in the game's boss fights, although losses are still inevitable. These battles punctuate the easy rhythm of daily life on PN-404, a welcome change of pace given the relative lack of challenge elsewhere. Until the end, anyway...

Pikmin 3's final level is a sprawling, beautifully designed test of everything you've learned so far, and a spike, not in difficulty but in pressure. As well as the hard stop at sunset there's a constantly encroaching threat that, if it catches you, can instantly trigger the end of the day, and the odds are further stacked against you by a subtle shift in Pikmin behaviour that slows you down. Even sterner tests await in Mission mode, in which you chase high scores and medals by collecting fruit or killing enemies to tight time limits.

As the pressure ratchets up late in the game, cracks begin to appear. The script is witty but there isn't enough of it: the crew's nightly reflections on the day start repeating after the 30-day mark, and frequently bear little relation to what actually happened. We could have done without Brittany fretting about the day's failure to find any food when we had ten days' worth saved up and had just lost 75 Pikmin in a botched boss fight, for instance. The script is diluted even further by the needless abundance of data files, some of which are curiously placed, at one point spoiling the imminent arrival of a new Pikmin type by explaining its abilities.

Yet perhaps the biggest disappointment of all is how iterative it all feels. *Pikmin* had one protagonist, the sequel had two, and here we have three, and while the puzzles that require all three are smartly designed, they're few and far between and you can bumble your way through most of the game by playing it like *Pikmin 1* and 2. Ultimately this is still a game of throwing a sufficient quantity of one Pikmin colour at an enemy or object and waiting until it's either destroyed, rebuilt or transported back to your ship. Luckily, it's a core loop that still delights. You destroy barriers so you can build bridges; you kill things to bring others to life. And when you fail, and their wispy souls vanish into the ether, there's not a gruesome death rattle or anguished scream but a soft, plaintive sort of sigh that's still the most heartbreaking sound effect in videogames.

Familiarity is both the worst and best thing about *Pikmin 3*. Twelve years after the original and nine after the sequel, little has changed – but little really needed to. It may not sell systems on its own, but it's a fine addition to a sparse software library that brings one of Nintendo's most vibrantly characterful series into the HD era and, critically, makes convincing use of the GamePad. And that, pending the arrival of a true system seller, is what Wii U needs most of all.

8

ABOVE Boss fights make heavy use of the most recent Pikmin you've met, but you'll need a mix to take them down. Rock Pikmin will shatter the Armoured Mawdad's shell, but Reds make quick work of its exposed flesh



KUMQUATS IN A NAME?

The alien produce on which your crew depend is easy on the eye, and delightfully named too, with the SS Drake analysing it and giving it a suitable title. It starts out sensibly enough – the Drake christens a strawberry a Sunseed Berry – but it gets progressively sillier. White grapes become Dawn Pustules; a cherry, Cupid's Grenade; the humble kiwi fruit, with its furry skin, becomes Disguised Delicacy. We expect Nintendo to be playful, of course, but rarely have its translations been afforded the same lightness of touch as its design. One defeated boss drops a flip phone that'll help the crew reach a new part of the world. Its name? Folded Data Glutton.

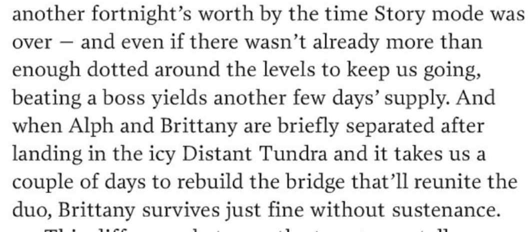
Post Script

What *Pikmin 3*'s design tells us about Nintendo's current identity crisis

A day in the life of a Pikmin commander is quite unlike anything else in videogames. As the sun rises and your craft returns to the planet's surface from its orbital haven, you assemble your squad. A hundred impossibly cute soldiers descend down the legs of an Onion, form up behind you, and await orders. You set off, your first order of business knocking coloured pellets from flowers, then transporting them back to the Onion to create new Pikmin and make up for the previous day's losses. You fling a horde of Reds at a stone gate that's blocking a path; while they set about demolishing it, you throw a squad of Yellows onto a high ledge to collect a piece of fruit you'd spotted the previous evening. With an army of Rocks and Reds you'll carve a path through a field of predators, taking careful aim to ensure each does the maximum possible damage to their target, sending some back with the corpses and the rest with a pile of rubble you need to rebuild a bridge. So it continues, until the sharp blast of a whistle sounds and a change to the soundtrack signals the day's end. With sunset approaching, you gather your troops and turn in – you in your ship, your helpers in their Onion – and reflect on the day's events.

At least, that's the day in the life of Alph, Brittany and Charlie, *Pikmin 3*'s three protagonists. In the GameCube original, Captain Olimar was under significantly more pressure. His ship, the SS Dolphin, broke up as it crash-landed on an uncharted planet, and its life-support systems could only protect Olimar from the planet's atmosphere for so long. As such he had just 30 days in which to gather the 25 missing parts of his ship. To Olimar, failure meant death; to the player, it meant starting all over again. It meant that beneath *Pikmin*'s relaxing, almost soporific rhythm lay a constant sense of desperation, of panic. A day without a retrieved ship part was a day wasted, one that took Olimar 24 hours closer to death. Throughout the day you'd ask yourself: am I doing enough?

Pikmin 3, by contrast, is a cakewalk. It's not an easy game: enemy encounters require speed of thought and reactions, boss battles can easily go horribly wrong, the final level is tough indeed, and throughout there's the gentle pressure to get your work done before sundown. But there is no overarching threat like Olimar's steadily depleting air supply. There's the need to gather enough food – one portion between three is enough – to keep your crew alive for another 24 hours, but in practice, this isn't a threat at all. Planet PN-404 has fruit in abundance; it has to if it's going to save the crew's home planet. There were only a handful of days where we didn't bring at least one piece of fruit back to base, and most of those were spent whittling down a boss's defences. We always had plenty in reserve – almost another fortnight's worth by the time Story mode was over – and even if there wasn't already more than enough dotted around the levels to keep us going, beating a boss yields another few days' supply. And when Alph and Brittany are briefly separated after landing in the icy Distant Tundra and it takes us a couple of days to rebuild the bridge that'll reunite the duo, Brittany survives just fine without sustenance.



The difference between the two games tells us much about how Nintendo has changed in the 12 years between them

This difference between the two games tells us much about how Nintendo has changed in the 12 years between them. Coming just a month after GameCube's Japanese launch – it would do the same again the following year when the console arrived in the west – *Pikmin*'s target market was the traditional early adopter of Nintendo hardware. Since then the company has dominated with Wii and DS, expanded an audience, redefined an industry and then faded from prominence. Firstparty Wii U releases so far have reflected Nintendo's struggle to create games that appeal both to its traditional customers and the people for whom *Wii Fit* and *Brain Training* are system sellers. Perhaps this is why *Pikmin*'s sole appearance on Wii was limited to re-releases of the first two games in the series: Nintendo could be forgiven for not knowing how to make such a mechanically dense and challenging game appeal to a casual audience without dialling down those elements to the extent that core players were put off.



It's a struggle reflected in the design of the Wii U system itself. Few would contend that the GamePad is anything like as intuitive as the Wii Remote, and it says much that even firstparty releases, which are usually the best games on Nintendo hardware and make the smartest use of its features, are struggling to make a convincing argument for the GamePad's existence. If anything, the plethora of control options available in firstparty Wii U games – GamePad, Remote and Nunchuk, Classic Controller Pro or a mix of all three – have served to undermine the console's USP.

Pikmin 3 is no exception. It offers the same three control options, but where GamePad functionality is so frequently forced, here it is both natural and additive. The absence of the panic brought on by that 30-day time limit may make for a different game, but it's not a worse one. If anything, its omission lets players suffuse themselves in *Pikmin*'s relaxing core loop, and makes for a better-paced game, one whose panic is sporadic and specific rather than constant. One where failure means trying again the next morning rather than starting all over again. One that suggests that the best way for Nintendo to solve its – and Wii U's – identity crisis is not via new business or marketing strategies, but through what it has always done best: design. ■

Dota 2

No matter how many hours of *Dota 2* you've played, it's never enough. No matter the days you've sunk into Valve's free-to-play MOBA, no matter how many of its hundred-plus heroes you've got to grips with, no matter how deep your understanding of its nuanced combat, *Dota*'s waters will always run deeper. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't jump in.

Dota 2's difficulty for new players stems from two root causes, the first of which is complexity. Two teams of five face off on a map that never changes. That map is trisected by three lanes – one on the top, one on the bottom, one in the middle – down which streams of AI 'creeps' are endlessly regurgitated. Enter *Dota 2*'s heroes, controlled by players, to turn the tide of battle.

Heroes help creeps by killing other creeps and destroying structures, but *Dota 2*'s pivotal moments come when heroes clash, using their personal suite of active and passive skills to drain an opponent's health bar. Killing an enemy hero rewards your character with gold, experience and access to better items and skills. Conversely, die during an enemy assault and you'll lose gold and find yourself in a respawn process of 30 seconds or more. This acts as a sort of 'sin bin', keeping you isolated from your friends and away from the steady dripfeed of experience points you'll earn from fighting in your chosen lane.

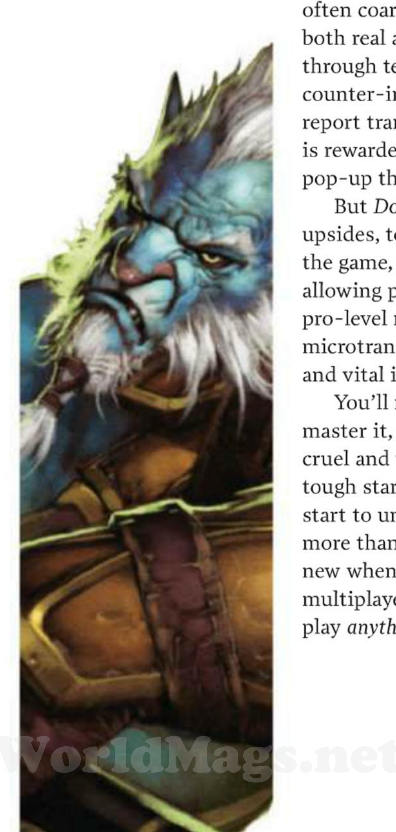
Heroes vary wildly in playstyle, skillset and mechanics. Each has a few designations, terms to define their ideal battlefield role: Supports, for example, are best played in tandem with tougher heroes, providing healing and crowd control; Carries are flimsy in the early game but ramp up their damage output quickly if successfully babysat until late in the match.

Those are *Dota 2*'s core concepts, and after a short acclimatisation period they feel good. Combat at its simplest level is made satisfying by punchy, easily read animations and tactile attacks. Fights between more skilled players are like fencing matches, where feints and ducks are as important as strikes in endlessly nuanced bust-ups. With more than 100 heroes available, and modes that often restrict their selection to keep team makeups fresh, few scuffles are ever alike.

There's a consistent thrill in getting a handle on a new hero, something only obtainable through actually playing with them. *Dota 2* has basic tutorials, but getting some games under your belt is vital. *Dota*'s structure means this process is sometimes painful. Unlike *League Of Legends*, there's no way to leave a game your team is obviously losing: quit early, in fact, and Valve will punish you by lumping you in a pool with other quitters. This leads to *Dota 2* at its worst: 40 minutes of inescapable slaughter as a demonstrably superior team races ahead in level and item loadout, killing you and yours in a few hits.

Publisher Valve
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

With more than 100 heroes available, and modes that often restrict their selection, few scuffles are ever alike



This hard education is one you'll have to suffer through: *Dota 2* is worse for having little support for low- to medium-skilled players beyond bashing their heads against repeated losses. Punch through and survive this often demoralising experience, and... you're still not home free. As you become comfortable with *Dota*'s simpler concepts, you'll find there's also an arcane set of rules and traditions that can feel wilfully counterintuitive at the second layer.

'Pushing' a lane – the act of helping your creep wave wipe out an enemy's in an attempt to reach a hostile tower – appears to be an empirically positive concept on paper. But in practice canny players will often do everything to prevent their creeps from storming forward. They'll physically block them, using their character's hitbox to halt walking animations. They'll even kill their own troops – 'denying' being the act of attacking your own AI friends to remove the last of their health bar, stopping the experience points their death would pay out from going to an opposing hero.

It's the kind of complexity that demands its own sub-language: a world of 'SS' and 'RE' and 'wards' and 'sheep sticks'. It's a language born of necessity, from describing some of *Dota 2*'s less intuitive concepts, but it's also one nurtured by a long-serving, fearsomely dedicated community. That community has been playing *Dota* for a decade, and that player involvement is the second barrier to entry for new players.

It has had positive and negative effects, although it's the latter that's the more visible. Opponents and team-mates – selected by a matchmaking system that does a decent job of choosing peers of a similar skill level – are often coarse, cruel or offensive. Minor indiscretions, both real and imagined, are stringently punished through text and voice chat. Thankfully, Valve's counter-insurgency tactics feel positive. Players can report transgressors, and if action is taken the reporter is rewarded with a notification of thanks – a karmic pop-up that's almost as satisfying as a hard-earned win.

But *Dota 2*'s community involvement has vast upsides, too. There's a healthy professional scene for the game, and Valve has built it into the menu system, allowing players to buy tickets to watch live streams of pro-level matches. International tournaments are a microtransaction away, making *Dota 2* feel important and vital in a way few games do.

You'll never be able to play enough *Dota 2* to totally master it, and although it's an F2P game it can be too cruel and unusual for some. But persist through the tough start and accept the idiosyncrasies, and you'll start to understand why so many have stuck with it for more than a decade. Why would they need something new when they've got this incredibly deep, rewarding multiplayer experience? Why would they need to play *anything* else when they've got *Dota*?

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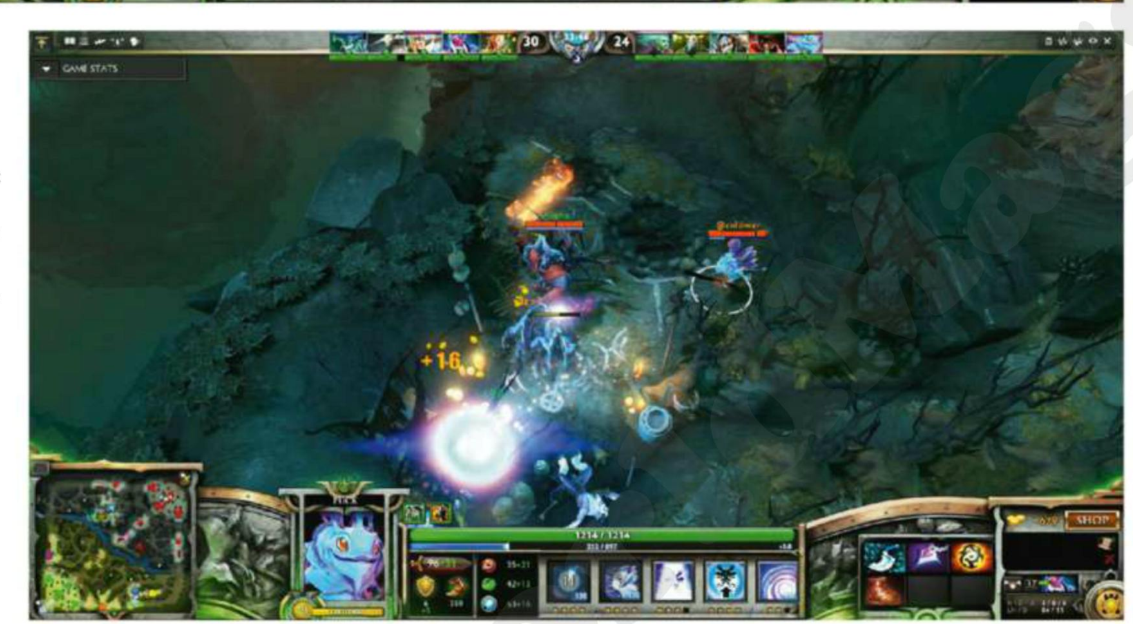




ABOVE Heroes come in different categories. Nukers can do vast amounts of damage quickly, while Disablers stun foes so teammates can get blows in. Initiators are usually tough enough to launch into the centre of a fight



TOP *Dota 2*'s name comes from Defense Of The Ancients, a mod for *Warcraft III* launched in 2003. The original *Dota* is not only still in operation, it forms the testbed for changes and additions to *Dota 2*. **ABOVE** Both *Dota* and *Dota 2* are functionally identical, meaning that although *Dota 2* is fresh out of beta, a good number of its multi-million strong community have had ten years to practise. It shows, too. **RIGHT** *Dota 2*'s matchmaking system usually provides acceptable games, but has more trouble deciding opponents for pre-made parties of three or more with variations in skill level. Too often, intermediate players trying to help a newbie will find their team quickly squashed underfoot



Tales Of Xillia

If the Japanese roleplaying game is in the midst of a protracted identity crisis – and *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*'s recent promotion to next mainline title in the genre-defining series is the latest indication this might be the case – then it's one that *Tales Of Xillia* appears unburdened by. Released in Japan in 2011 to mark the series' 15th anniversary, this breezy adventure rarely strays from safe genre templates and tropes. Instead, development team Namco Tales Studio focused its energy on fine detail invention and fat-trimming.

And while dual protagonists Jude Mathis (a medical student investigating a military research facility after treating employees with suspicious injuries) and Milla Maxwell (the girlish incarnation of a benevolent god with magnificently unruffleable hair) find themselves caught in the uninspiring familiarity of a world-saving adventure, the quick pace and firm focus is nevertheless refreshing. Take, for example, *Tales Of Xillia*'s skits – dialogue interludes involving the main characters in your party that can be triggered at almost any point with a button press. These fully voiced exchanges are sometimes humorous and sometimes affecting but, whatever their tone, they always add colourful characterisation and backstory to both the world and its principal players. By making each skit an optional extra rather than a forced cutscene, the interested player is able to choose to listen when it suits, while the indifferent player can ignore them in order to focus fully on the business of exploration and combat.

These battles align with the sense of swiftness found in the storytelling, and are perhaps the shortest and sharpest yet seen in a Japanese RPG. The *Tales* series has favoured direct attack inputs over laborious menu selections since its Super Famicom debut, but in *Tales Of Xillia* the action is complemented by the capacity for new strategic tinkering. Your character enjoys free movement on the battlefield, allowing you to flank your enemies, with attack options changing seamlessly with your movement. Position is important from the outset, increasing the chances of landing a critical hit when attacking from behind a target.

Straightforward attacks can be interspersed with Artes, powerful magical assaults that, in their more complex guises, can involve multiple characters. In battle, your primary character can also form a link with any other team member with a button press. Linking with different partners yields different bonuses, with the supporting character stepping in when you find yourself flanked by a foe, restoring or resurrecting you when you fall in battle, or breaking an enemy's guard. These helping hands build camaraderie, which fortifies the narrative development of the onscreen friendships in a manner reminiscent of *Fire Emblem: Awakening*.

The speed and intensity of battles emphasise quick decision making and fast fingers, moving the game away from the cerebral planning of other JRPGs. After each encounter you earn bonus experience points, awarded for the length of your longest combo, the time taken to complete a battle or finishing without taking damage – and rewarding player expression and skill makes the way in which you play battles as important as the outcome.

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer Namco Tales Studio
Format PS3
Release August

Positioning is important, increasing the chances of landing a critical hit when attacking from behind a target



This emphasis on action is further bolstered by numerous strategic options that exert a significant influence on the flow of combat. While you control just one party member, a wide variety of strategic AI directions can be applied to individual teammates. You can direct their behaviour in specific situations, dictating what sort of healing or augmentation items they'll use on one another, adding a layer of optional, yet considerable, strategic customisation.

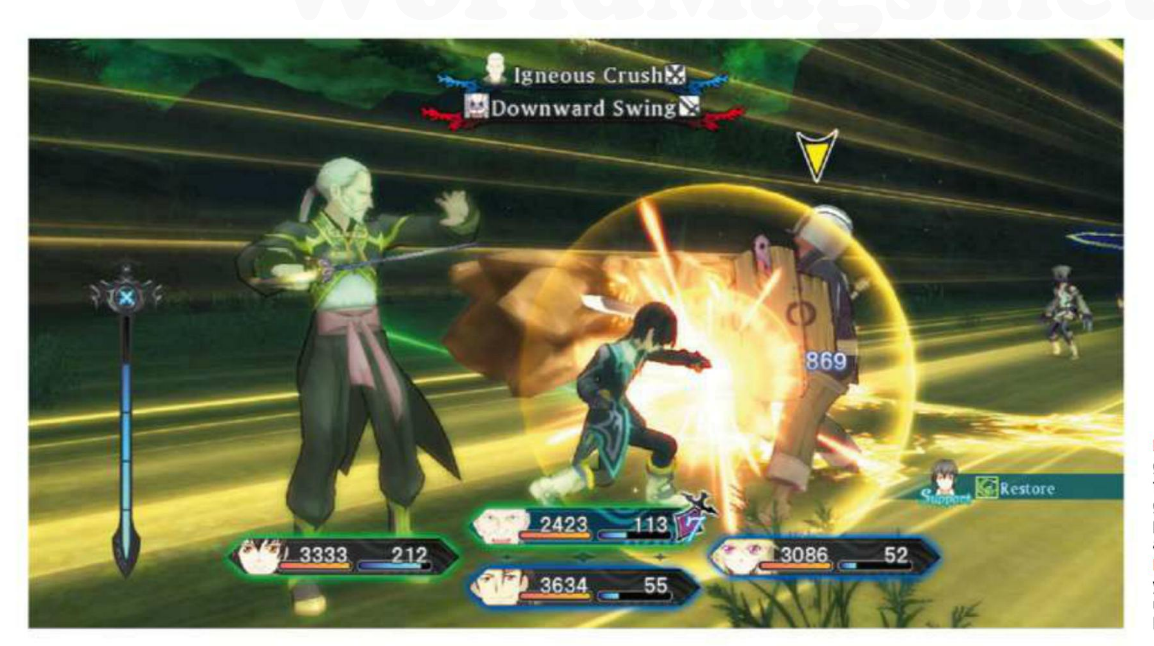
Off the battlefield there's further customisation in the form of Lilium Orbs, currency earned whenever a character levels up. These are used to purchase upgrade nodes on an abstract web of abilities – increasing strength, health, agility, dexterity and so on – but also adding entirely new moves and Artes to a character's repertoire. It's a system reminiscent of *Final Fantasy X*'s Sphere Grid or *Final Fantasy XIII*'s Crystarium but much more accessible and, despite the simplistic presentation, no less engaging and compulsive.

Exploration through this bright, pastoral world is often linear, but *Xenoblade*-esque twinkles of light punctuate each environment, highlighting resources that can be collected and used to upgrade the game's various shops. As you invest in stores, the range of items on sale increases while prices fall, offering a powerful incentive to explore every crease and nook of the world in order to improve your team's armoury. There's a certain rugged elegance to these interlocking systems, which succeed in drawing you into the game's ecosystem, even if the anime-styled story fails to.

While *Tales Of Xillia* is aimed at fans of Japanese manga and anime – the game has already inspired four manga adaptations – its characters evade the medium's many clichés and are generally likeable. The story, with its eastern spiritual and metaphysical overtones, may fail to capture the imagination as a whole, but the moment-by-moment interactions between its characters are engaging and frequently well written.

There is, however, a certain thinness to the game when set against recent high points in the genre. There's none of *Xenoblade Chronicles*' restless inventiveness, little of *Dragon Quest*'s or *Ni No Kuni*'s earthy connection, and the game's meagre sidequests pale in comparison with those found within the likes of *Final Fantasy XIII-2*. What's left is, while smartly streamlined, a thoroughly orthodox game within a well-established type, a niche within a niche that's getting smaller all the time.

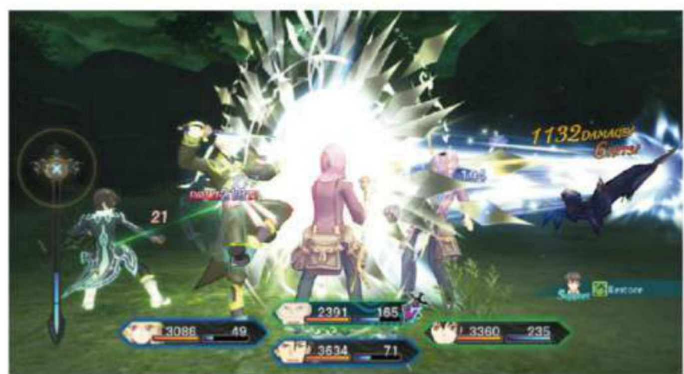
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LEFT The battle system's fighting-game undertones can be seen in the use of the Square button to guard against foe's attacks, a precaution that reduces damage and prevents staggering.
BELOW The specific type of Arte your primary character selects to use will change according to how long you hold down the button



Tales Of Xillia is the 13th instalment in Namco's *Tales* series. A direct sequel, *Tales Of Xillia 2*, was launched in Japan in late 2012, with a planned release in the US and Europe at some point during 2014





Deus Ex: The Fall

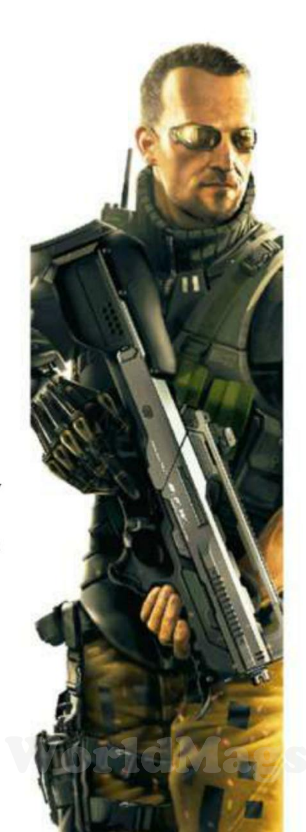
Publisher Square Enix
Developer n-Fusion, Eidos Montreal
Format iOS (version tested), Android
Release Out now

What makes a *Deus Ex* game? Gang hangouts and grimy, techno-playing bars? Conspiracy theories and moody visual themes? Emails and ebooks left in hotel rooms? Or is it air vents and open environments? Rooftops and basements? Multiple approaches to the same task? Because *The Fall* offers plenty from the first list, and just about enough from the second. *The Fall* might not be a port of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, but astonishingly it feels like it could be. So much has been retained – the visual style, the combat mechanics, the upgrades – that *The Fall* can comfortably claim to be one of the most assured iOS translations of what was originally envisioned as a console or PC experience we've ever played. And, yes, we know that's faint praise.

Fittingly for a *Deus Ex* game, *The Fall* can't decide which control options work best, so it lets you choose. Virtual controls are by far the most usable, although the tap-to-move approach seems well suited to diving in and out of cover while the optional tap-to-lock-on system aids you in shooting moving targets. Inevitably, then, *The Fall* is more comfortable when it's about planning and positioning – in short, when it's played as a stealth game or an aggressive cover shooter. Try to treat it as a traditional firstperson shooter and all the mechanical augmentations in the world simply won't help you overcome the controls. The UI is thoughtful and considered, however: hold the fire button while using a ranged weapon and you'll instantly transition into a free-aim scope view. And if you played *Human Revolution*'s hacking minigame with a gamepad, we don't have to describe the relief a touchscreen brings.

The *Human Revolution* art style, meanwhile, holds up spectacularly well. While character models and environments lack detail compared to their big-screen cousins, the heavy stylisation and use of golden-hued light and dark shadows translates perfectly to the iPad screen, and even benefits from the crisp Retina display. *The Fall*'s single hub, a futuristic Panama City, evokes a hint of balmy atmosphere while clearly belonging to the same universe as the previous game's Hengsha and Detroit locations. A journey on a rain-lashed cargo plane, meanwhile, manages to conjure a noirish mood, even without liberal particle effects and a higher polycount. *The Fall* is one of the most visually detailed tablet titles we've seen – which is necessary to ensure that snooping around the basement floor of a nightclub or industrial warehouse doesn't feel boring.

The heavy stylisation and use of golden-hued light and dark shadows translates perfectly to the iPad screen



You explore Panama as Ben Saxon, a mechanically augmented British ex-SAS operative who's just effected a rather dramatic resignation from the Tyrants – *Human Revolution*'s boss enemies and *The Fall*'s major link to that game. *The Fall*'s story takes place at the periphery of *Human Revolution* protagonist Adam Jensen's – and, while it doesn't have much to add to that game's timely consideration of a possibly transhuman future, if you're invested in the series' interleaved conspiracies you'll find plenty to mull over in the hackable computer terminals and pocket secretaries secreted around the maps. What you won't find, however, is much of a resolution: it turns out *The Fall* is merely the first part of a longer series. This suits *Deus Ex* well enough, however, as the game's hub structure is inherently episodic.

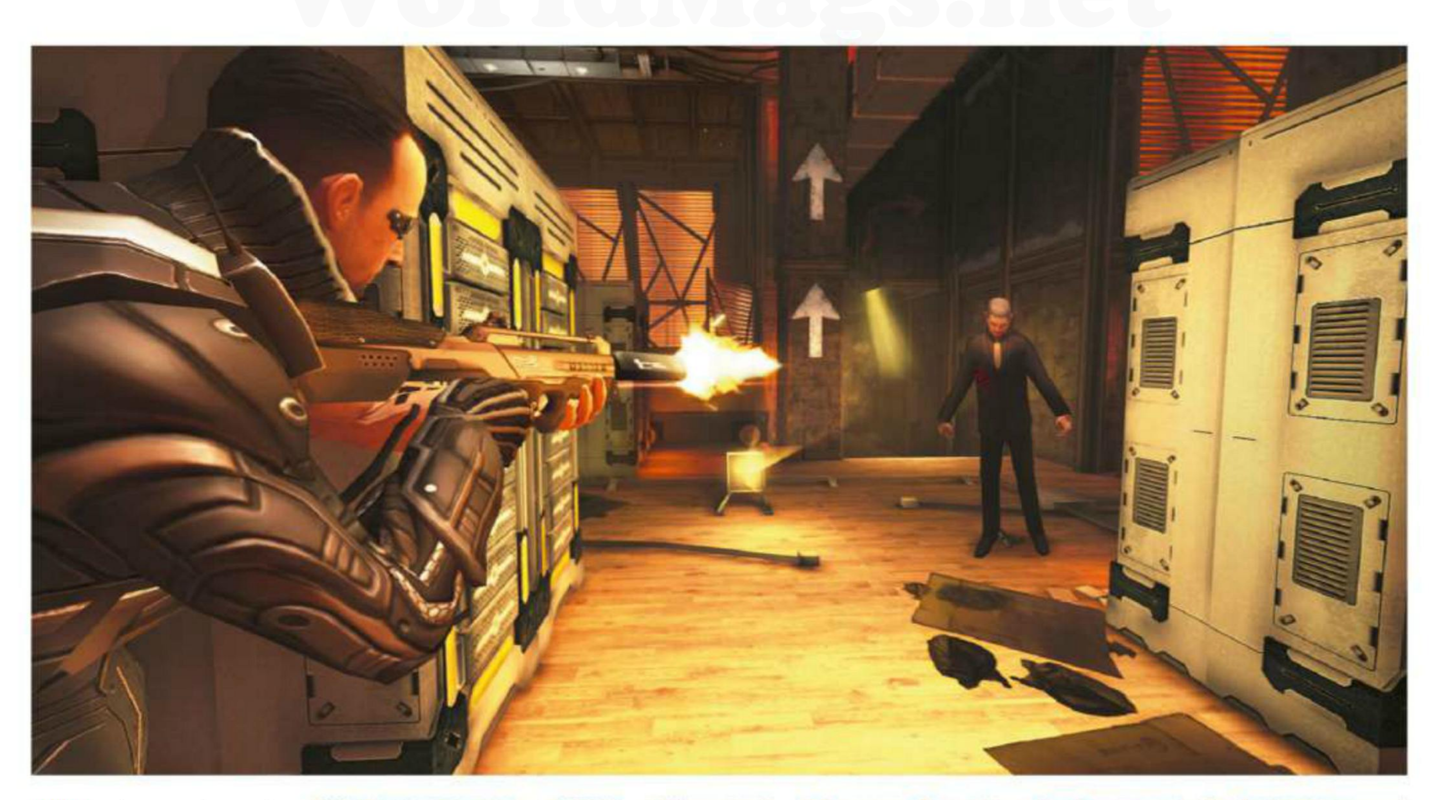
Saxon's search for anti-rejection drug Neuropozyne draws him deep into Panama City's underworld and requires him to pinball between a typically *Deus*-esque mixture of underground clinics, gang hideouts, plush hotels and nightclubs. If Panama seems a little more segmented than Detroit and Hengsha, it's certainly no smaller, although there's a disappointing lack of optional interiors and side-missions. *Deus Ex*'s open levels have always had a hint of artificiality about them – they're too small and self-enclosed to genuinely believe in as places – but the lack of any spaces not directly connected to Saxon's mission doesn't help.

Main missions feel similarly reduced. The options are there – be it for stealthy approaches, wall-smashing entrances, frontal assaults and air-vent-assisted infiltrations – but they're crammed into a tighter space than in the previous game's levels, and this can't help but make the variety seem rather contrived. Still, it's easy to forgive this when so much of the *Human Revolution* experience – studying guard patrols before creeping up for instant takedowns, infiltrating security rooms in order to subvert guard drones – has been preserved. Stealthy approaches are inadvertently encouraged by a disappointing limitation of the hardware: bodies now disappear a few moments after Saxon fells them, making it easier to remain undetected.

Still, Saxon himself remains free from hardware limitations. Almost the full suite of augmentations found in the previous game are available here, although the relatively short, four-hour length means you don't, in this first part at least, get the satisfaction of developing Saxon over time. That said, only one new augmentation – a stealth dash that instantly transports Saxon to wherever you tap on screen – feels designed with the possibilities afforded by a touchscreen.

That, in a sense, is *The Fall*'s wider issue: n-Fusion has done such a good job of making a cut-down *Human Revolution* on iOS and Android that *all* it's done is make a cut-down *Human Revolution*. There's nothing here that wasn't done bigger, in more detail, and with more options, in Eidos Montreal's game, while the story so far fails to introduce new ideas or themes. Still, what it aims to recreate it does so assuredly: *The Fall* offers a compact, streamlined follow-up to Adam Jensen's adventure, and a welcome means of returning to Eidos Montreal's vibrantly imagined future.

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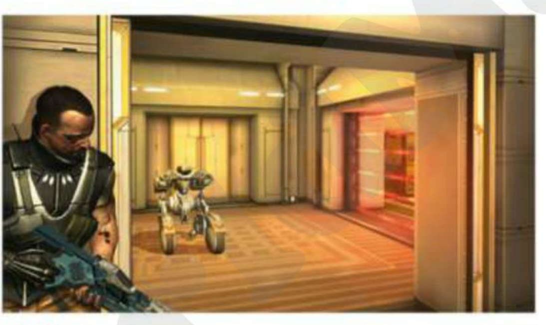


ABOVE Popping out to shoot works fine, although weapons that are slow to fire – like tranquilliser darts – can be slightly unreliable if you try to rely on autolock alone.
RIGHT Ben Saxon is not entirely bland, but he lacks the gravel-throated cool of either JC Denton or Adam Jensen. We actually almost forgot about the second's game Alex Denton while writing this, though, so (s)he is probably worse



BELOW As with *Human Revolution*, investing Praxis points into hacking early on in the game will pay off in a big way, not least because you can then hack everything in order to gain more experience points





ABOVE EMP grenades will knock out bots, although there are also a couple of opportunities to hack their software and subvert them to your cause. In fact, that's the only way we found to tackle one encounter late in the game

Deadpool

Publisher Activision
Developer High Moon Studios
Format 360, PC, PS3
Release Out now

On the face of it, Deadpool's a fine fit for a videogame. The wisecracking comic book antihero is as capable with a firearm as with the twin blades in his hands. He can get around at speed, too, with a double jump and teleportation powers. Perhaps most importantly, he doesn't take himself too seriously, meaning High Moon can use a barrage of jokes to, at best, distract from the mediocrity of this thirdperson action game or, at worst, excuse it.

After a short intro in which Deadpool is introduced to the uninitiated as a cheerfully puerile fart-joking man of action – wandering around his apartment pointing out hollow props and even making a small deposit in his bathroom – we're dropped into a sewer for a tutorial. From the command to "see what the A button does" onwards, it's made repeatedly, wearingly clear that Deadpool doesn't so much break the fourth wall as smash his head into its every component brick until it shatters, barely pausing for High Moon to replace it before doing it again, and again. This makes sense in a comic book setting, where Deadpool is a refreshing counterpoint to scores of po-faced, latex-clad peers. In a videogame, it needs to be handled delicately.

There is evidence here of the developer's gentle hand. Deadpool – voiced by a barely recognisable Nolan North – knows he's in a videogame, and is in regular contact with High Moon president Peter Della Penna. When an early chapter ends with a explosion-filled CG cutscene, the next begins as a top-down 8bit-style dungeon crawler, and our hero takes an angry phone call in which he's told he's squandered his budget.

Deadpool frequently speaks to the player, offering advice during combat and chiding them at the game over screen. Videogame references come thick and fast. Activision's cash cow is lampooned in a slow-mo breach and clear section that Deadpool introduces by saying: "Time for a spot of cross-promotion." There are nods to pop culture, too, with our hero checking in, Foursquare-style, to a boss arena. One tooltip references the Rickroll; one weapon description ends with #YOLO.

For every joke that hits there are half a dozen that miss, and Deadpool's casual chauvinism starts out grating and gets steadily worse. He's a lecherous presence, the camera switching to firstperson whenever a woman's onscreen and zooming in tightly on the predictable points of interest. He calls one fallen female boss "hot tits"; there are jokes about necrophilia and motorboating. A pair of hefty sledgehammers, we're told, "knock the meat out of bitches". There's a 'that's what she said' joke, for pity's sake. We're no strangers to misogyny and misfiring jokes in videogames, of course, but they're rarely delivered with such gusto or at such a wearingly breakneck pace.

When Deadpool's not ogling breasts, cracking wise or talking to the player, he's mocking the developer. On paper, these moments are ripe for comic potential. In practice, they serve only to highlight, as if by way of apology, dull design. Take our ascent up the side of a skyscraper, in which we pull a lever to make a window cleaner's elevator rise a few floors, jump to another and repeat. One of Deadpool's split personalities – the deep-voiced, serious one – asks if we're sure this is the right way. "The designers wouldn't have put 'em here if they didn't want us to use 'em," comes the reply. When a trudge through the dreary sewer system is completed, Deadpool emerges into the daylight and chides the developer: "No more sewers, High Moon."

It's hamstrung by a camera so bad even Ninja Gaiden-era Tomonobu Itagaki would think that it needs fixing



It would be tolerable if the systems at *Deadpool*'s core were good enough, but this is a hybrid thirdperson combat game and shooter in which neither element is done well. Gunplay is clunky, with imprecise hit detection and recoil (among the few things that can't be improved in the upgrade menus). The light-light-heavy combat system isn't without merit – there's some depth here with dodge and jump cancels – but your options are limited, with three melee weapons and a paltry moveset for each. The whole thing is hamstrung by a camera so bad even *Ninja Gaiden*-era Tomonobu Itagaki would think it needs fixing. It's wayward enough in open arenas; take the action inside and the only proof that you're hitting anything comes in rivers of claret spurting from offscreen foes. You're told you can use guns mid-combo, but do so and Deadpool shoots right into the centre of the screen, a system obviously introduced on the assumption the camera would work.

Some instafail stealth sections aside, it's smooth sailing until the final third of the game, when enemies ramp up in health, number and damage output while checkpoints are yanked farther and farther apart and the whole thing becomes a slog. But it's not in its mechanics, camera or misfiring wit that *Deadpool* really unravels: its fate is ultimately sealed by a single button. Tap B and our hero teleports a short distance to safety, but that same button also performs a *Batman: Arkham Asylum*-style counter. Too often, instead of retreating to let your health recharge, you're plunged right back into trouble. Late on, you'll also press B to trigger a weapon-specific takedown on a stunned enemy. These canned animations might instantly kill a foe, but they have no invincibility, so you've got no option but to take damage from the rest of the mob while they play out. Oddly, this is one design sin Deadpool lets pass without comment.

And therein lies the problem with breaking videogames' fourth wall: it can only work if the systems underpinning it are beyond reproach. While we'll accept that Deadpool the character is an acquired taste, this is an indisputably poor game, one whose knowing winks and quips come off not as metacommentary but as tacit apologia for its litany of specific failings.

3



BELOW Regular enemies pose few problems, with only the symbol over their heads warning of an incoming attack, requiring you to stop mashing XXY and press B to counter. If you do take any damage during one of these onslaughts, your health takes frustratingly long to recharge





LEFT By the game's end Deadpool has a varied arsenal to complement his melee moveset. All can be upgraded – increasing damage, range, clip size and so on – using Deadpool Points earned by killing enemies and collecting tokens

TOP This hulking fellow has a ground pound attack that sends a shockwave across the screen, and an AOE aerial butt slam. Later on you'll face two of them at once, accompanied by regular enemies. RIGHT Combat is simple – button mashing is a viable tactic – though there is depth here. Moves can be cancelled with a teleport or jump, and air combos are the most efficient, stunning foes and setting them up for instant-kill Takedowns





Dark

Like a brooding vampire attempting to get by in a human world, *Dark* has decided its best chance of survival is to hide in plain sight. Woefully underfunded and undercooked in comparison with contemporary stealth titles, Realmforge's supernatural *Splinter Cell* knockoff uses every trick in the book to try to disguise its true identity. From the smeary cel-shaded visuals (an aesthetic that hides a multitude of sins) to the way amnesiac lead Eric Bain clumsily 'warps' from cover to cover (a shroud of smoke serving as a placeholder to actual animation frames), *Dark* is a masterclass in blemish concealment. But there are some things that can't be faked so easily – some parts of *Dark* yield no reflection when you hold a mirror up to them. Terminally, chief among these is the enemy AI.

Enemy intelligence is the single most important element of a stealth game; indeed, it could be argued that AI *is* the genre in its entirety. If you can't rely upon your opponents to behave rationally and consistently, then there's no reward to be found from outwitting them, no reason to persevere with learning behavioural patterns and no enjoyment to be gleaned from experimenting with what you've learned. There's nothing left but dreary warehouses.

Melee attacks are a one-hit knockout but the resulting enemy scream tips off *Dark's* AI. Far better to get closer for a silent chokehold, but woolly controls make it hard to differentiate between the two

Publisher Kalypso Media
Developer Realmforge Studios
Format 360 (version tested), PC
Release Out now



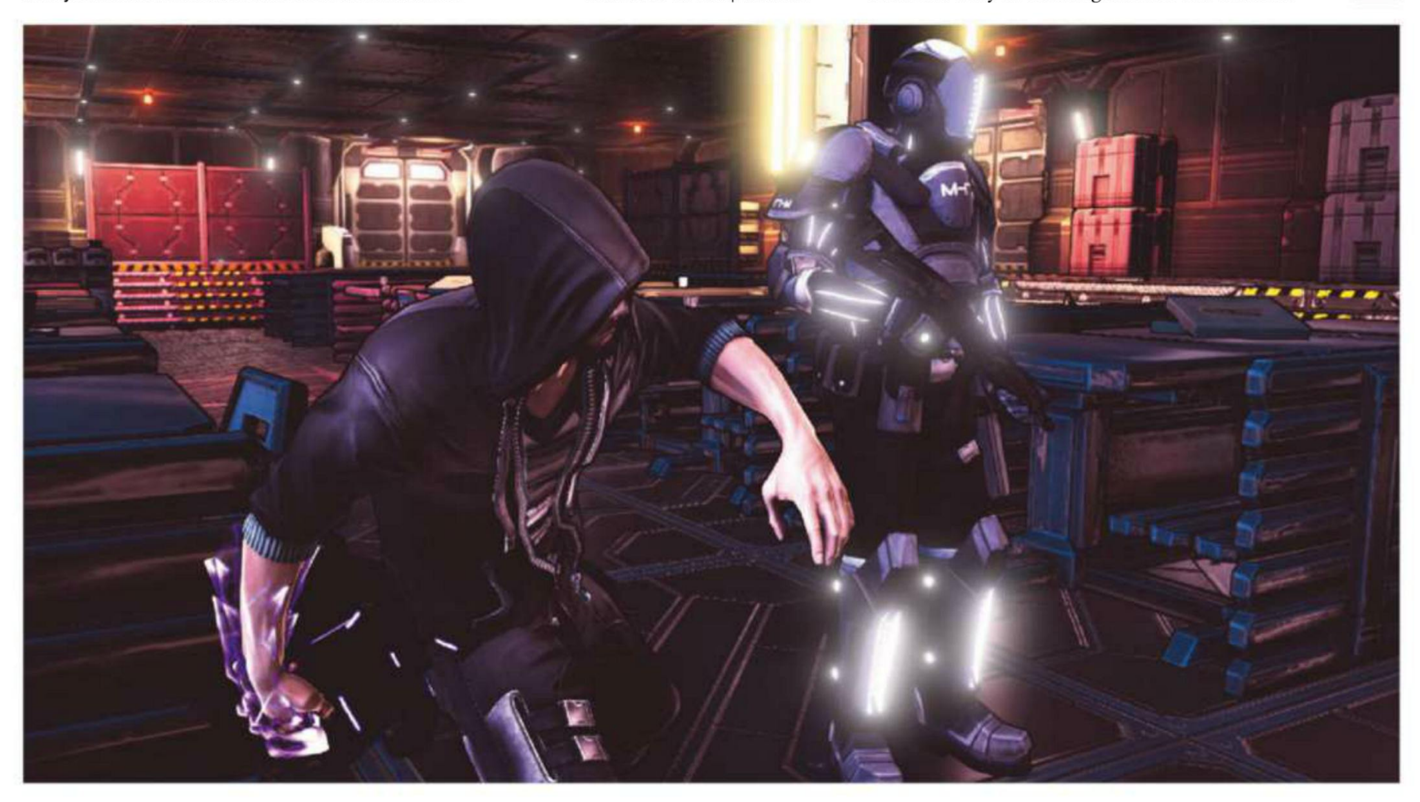
VITAE SIGNS
Bucking the trend towards stealth-action titles, *Dark* is a very pure, old-fashioned stealth title, with heavy penalties for detection. Bain's melee punch is an instant KO from behind, but enemies aware of your presence will block it more often than not, making it a suicidal tactic. Where design permits, it pays to take the time to feast on your prey rather than simply knock them out – it's the only way to fill Bain's 'vitae' meter, which is what fuels his vampiric skills.

If you put *Dark*'s AI into a bird, it would fly backwards. Guards move around in laughably basic patterns, fail to notice you hiding behind transparent cover and, when giving chase, lose track of your whereabouts with alarming ease. Getting spotted is actually one of your more viable strategies as, once in a secluded spot, it's easy to lure guards to their doom one by one using a trail of corpses as bait. *Dark* restores the balance in favour of the AI drones in the most spiteful way possible: certain guards stand motionless in one location, their gaze permanently fixed ahead, usually at the bottom of a staircase or similar. It's a cheap, frustrating and artificial way of cutting off creative avenues to the player – and this in a genre where no gameplan should be off-limits to the bold experimenter.

Salvation does not come in the form of player locomotion. For a vampire, Bain is slow, cumbersome and unable even to jump onto railings, and his vampiric powers – such as time distortion, teleportation and temporary cloaking – fail to serve as a counterbalance. His abilities are more commonly implemented as a fix for sub-par level design. It's thoroughly unsatisfying.

Realmforge is clearly a student of the genre, but budget is king here, and the studio lacks the financial clout to even pierce the flesh of a crowded market. Despite being crafted with noble intentions, *Dark* succeeds only in sucking the life out of itself.





Rogue Legacy

Publisher Cellar Door
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

Strictly speaking, this is blasphemy. *Rogue Legacy* takes the slot-machine nature of the roguelike platformer and grafts onto it a sprawling RPG progression tree. Start a new game, and to the right looms Castle Hamson: an intricate arrangement of halls, forests, misty towers and flame-filled dungeons that rearranges and repopulates itself each time you visit. To the left is your skill tree, represented as another castle, which grows steadily as you invest in it with gold looted from neighbouring halls. Roguelikes should pit your innate abilities against a mercurial algorithm, but here the stats are increasingly on your side.

You're still at the mercy of chance, however, not least during character selection. After each permadeath, you pick your character's successor from a selection of three. These new champions will inherit the equipment and skill upgrades you've purchased with past heroes, but they'll throw in a few genetic traits of their own. So Lady Blair V might be a powerful Assassin with a useful flame spell, but she also suffers from gigantism.

There are enough character classes, traits and spells in *Rogue Legacy* that the select screen consistently throws up bizarre, genetically deficient heroes whose limitations seem cruelly ironic – the Archmage who fires spells backwards, the Barbarian with weak limbs – and as such, each run through the castle can feel novel even before the game scrambles the innards of its Gothic pile. This Metroidvania castle, comprising four distinct environments and a final boss designed to be tackled sequentially as you grow in power, manages to feel distinct each visit, yet is always arranged with vicious, enemy-dense hostility. Your basic abilities – a jump, a forward slash and a random spell – are flexible enough to weather whatever the game throws at you, but that doesn't mean that, upon wandering into a spike-lined tunnel filled with flame-flinging mages, you wouldn't be better off finding another route. The secret is finding goals to suit your current skillset: a weakling Spelunker with dwarfism would be better hunting for gold than tackling a boss.

Said gold can be invested in numerous upgrades. And these, unashamedly, are a crutch. They're a way of ensuring that each new generation will be hardier, more mana-rich than the last, just as the equipment vendors outside the castle are there to let you offset your genetic limitations or heighten advantages. None of this will be to purists' tastes, but these RPG systems mean each run can build towards a greater whole. *Rogue Legacy* offers the silly, slapstick cruelty of the best roguelikes, but twins it with something just as appealing: a tantalising hint of control over your fate.

8



QUANTITATIVE BRUISING
One of *Rogue Legacy*'s subtle systems is the rising price of, well, everything. Initial upgrades and equipment come cheap, but as prices rise you're forced to push farther into the castle, where richer, tougher enemies await. It's a neat way to ensure that you can't simply grind early environments to break the progression curve. Crucially, you have to spend the bulk of your loot before each fresh start, so you have to steal ever-increasing amounts as the game continues.

There are times when the game is reminiscent of a bullet-hell shooter, but at other times *Castlevania* is the obvious comparison. While encounters do get easier as your stats increase, only the skilled will avoid taking damage



Layton Brothers: Mystery Room

Publisher Level-5
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Layton Brothers: Mystery Room is a strange mix – a blend of Level-5's trademark cutesy charisma and a rather more brutal aesthetic than the team has tackled before – and it doesn't always feel like a comfortable artistic fit. Rather than bring the charm of the Professor Layton series to smartphones and tablets, Level-5 has opted for a noir crime-scene simulator complete with gruesome kills and heated confrontations with suspects.

You take on the role of rookie detective and apprentice to Alfendi Layton, son of Professor Hershel Layton. Examining the reconstructed scene of a crime – a timed routine of spinning, zooming and discovering each shred of evidence – you're then tasked with pointing the finger and delivering justice. It plays out as part interactive story (there are gripping multiple-choice exchanges with hot-headed suspects and a substantial backstory for each case) and part linear puzzle game. The initial cases are free but offer barely an hour's worth of play; two meatier case collections are available via in-app purchase.

The flow, formula and atmosphere differ from those of previous *Layton* titles, but there's enough shared DNA to warrant the game's brand association. Production values are high, Apple's iPad providing the best canvas yet for Level-5's animation and colouring. And while the puzzles and narrative take on a different rhythm to the core series, the delicate balance in their concoction and the demands of their solution echo those of father Layton's finest.

7



Mighty Switch Force! 2

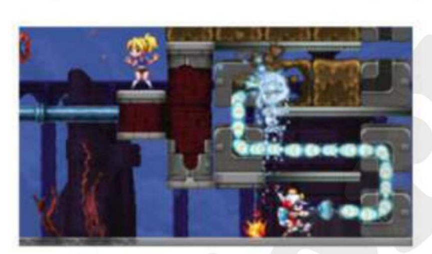
Publisher WayForward Technologies
Developer In-house
Format 3DS
Release Out now

Mighty Switch Force! 2, like its predecessor, is two games in one. The first is a puzzler that tasks you with creating a safe route through hazards and enemies using a weapon and the ability to shift platforms from background to foreground. The second is a test of twitch platforming skill and memory, as you negotiate the same obstacles at speed in a race to beat a demanding par time. Those who were disappointed with the first game's brevity will be happy to play through another 16 stages. We had, however, hoped for more invention than WayForward demonstrates here.

Rather than developing the original's ideas, the developer was content to simply reuse them. Zipping around via a network of boost tiles no longer carries the same thrill, and while squeezing the shoulder button as a monster passes by a translucent platform remains one of the most deliciously cruel ways to dispose of an enemy, repeated use of the trick diminishes its impact.

The new water gun, meanwhile, is a qualified success. It is responsible for the game's most ingenious moments, as you rearrange blocks to guide jets of water through narrow channels, washing away muddy obstacles or nudging enemies off platform edges. Yet it lacks the precision of a laser pistol, proving disruptive to the flow of a game that demands something approaching perfection. And with stages both longer and harder than the original, we suspect fewer players will persevere with *MSF2*'s second game once they've beaten the first.

6



Capsule

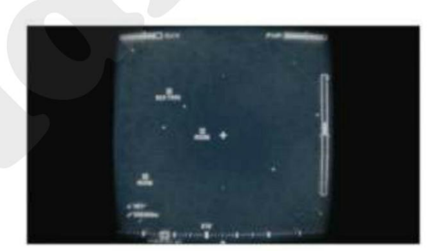
Publisher Adam Saltsman
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

Adam Saltsman's *Capsule* is a survival horror as pure as they come. You – and the game goes to great length to ensure it really *does* feel like you – are trapped in some type of ship, suspended in an equally ambiguous void, with nothing but a suggested trajectory as your guide. Once you've mastered the capsule's primitive propulsion system and learned to parse its basic radar, you head in that direction, all the while monitoring your ever-dwindling power and oxygen supplies.

It's a game of resource management, essentially. The void is sprinkled with nodes that can be scanned to reveal air pockets, fuel supplies, and the occasional threat – but mostly just useless detritus. As supplies run low you'll be forced to weigh up the merits of veering off course. Reach each waypoint and you'll be treated to an ambiguous, slowly unfolding narrative, one email at a time.

Capsule is minimalist to the point of crudity, and a little too reliant on chance. But as an exercise in generating immersion from the most basic of ingredients, it is unparalleled. The conceit might be obvious but it works: with no UI other than that monochromatic display, your monitor becomes the radar screen and your keyboard stands in for its pitiful controls. Run low on air and your desperate gasping for breath fills your ears. Bump into objects and they will clunk eerily against your hull. There's a claustrophobic terror to *Capsule*, as pure as it is stark.

7



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things gets underway on p96, where we scout out SCEE's senior business development manager Shahid Ahmad to discuss his passion for indie development. Places braves the harsh world of the schoolyard on p98, as we explore Bullworth Academy, the central location of *Bully's* modest yet effective open world. *Halo*'s Cortana is a mixture between a useful AI construct and a human companion to Master Chief, and we consider whether her humanity outweighs her in-game purpose on p100. Meanwhile, *Bulletstorm* developer People Can Fly is the focus of our Studio Profile on p102, and we take a look at how its acquisition by Epic helped the studio to continue making firstperson shooters. In The Making Of… on p106, we peer down the pipeline of Disney Mobile's *Where's My Water?*, a physics puzzler about digging that struck gold with its lead character, Swampy the alligator, and reached the number one spot on the App Store. Our columnists provide some final thoughts, with Tadhg Kelly (p110) trying in vain to rekindle some nostalgic FPS joy, and Clint Hocking (p112) asking why games even need to discuss meaningful themes when you could just be entertained, and mindlessly shoot endless foreign terrorists in the head. Finally, James Leach (p114) is sick of zombie horror, and wonders why games haven't called on some of the nightmarish creatures from classic Gothic literature for new inspiration.



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Bungie introduced *Halo*'s Cortana (see p100) in a series of cryptic promo emails released before the game, which adds to her mythology and the sense that she has always existed



People

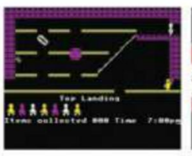
SHAHID AHMAD

The man winning over indies for Sony with passion and commitment

Shahid Ahmad is the go-to guy for indie developers eager to get their games onto Sony's platforms, but he's famed among C64 fans as the man behind *Chimera*

CV

URL www.chimera2010.com
Selected softography *Jet Set Willy* (C64 port, 1984), *Chimera* (1985), *Nightshade* (C64 port, 1985), *Conflict* (1990)






PlayStation Vita is an incredible piece of hardware, but its early lineup has been thin. Every day, **Shahid Ahmad** goes to work to remedy that situation. As a senior business development manager at SCE Europe, Ahmad's Strategic Content team has been responsible for signing *Luftrausers*, *Thomas Was Alone* and *Hotline Miami* to the PlayStation Store.

In an industry where the stereotype of 'the suit' – ignorant, duplicitous and concerned only with the bottom line – casts a long shadow, Ahmad represents something novel. As indie developers and changing distribution methods shift the balance of power, he's become a human face for a once-intractable corporate giant that has radically rethought its relationship with creatives.

Having joined Sony's developer relations team in December 2005, Ahmad was involved in everything from the launch of PlayStation Minis to building out a console development ecosystem for the market in India. His current role began in January 2012, when he started running the new strategic content team. That sounds dry, but the 47-year-old explains what it really means: "I get to work with developers and publishers, to sign games, and to do what it takes to make that all happen. It's probably one of the best jobs in videogames today."

In many ways, Ahmad is more like an A&R man from the music industry than a stereotypical videogame executive. It's not uncommon to see him share his company email address to promising devs via Twitter. And he's constantly improving connections, generating many stories of how he goes out of his way for the developers he covets.

"To some extent, it's the methodology we use," he says. "It's old-school A&R, too, in the sense that we're very interested in working with exciting developers with whom we'd like to build relationships. We love seeing developers progress through our platforms, growing with us. Honeyslug, FuturLab, Dakko Dakko and Vlambeer are some examples of this approach. It's a new approach to A&R, in that the business model we use is fair and developer-friendly. Our philosophy is 'support, steer, don't interfere'. Developers are creatives and you don't tell them what kind of game to make. You find those with a vision and you nurture their vision."

Stories of Ahmad's commitment illustrate that nurturing attitude. When Vlambeer's **Rami Ismail** had his Vita stolen at Eurogamer's Expo last year, Ahmad left his sickbed and drove across London on a Saturday to give Ismail his own Vita. The next day, he dropped the Dutch developer off at Victoria Coach Station. "There was no ulterior motive to any of this," says Ahmad. "Nobody likes to leave their sickbed, but you have to look after your guests. Rami was a guest in my town."

"If there are ever Vlambeer games coming to Sony," says Ismail, "it's because of moments like those. It was pretty amazing. Shahid's main USP is not a single, simple thing. He's passionate but he mixes that with accessibility, capacity and dependability. I talk to passionate people every day, but never are they as passionate, easy to reach and capable of making things happen."

At FuturLab, creator of *Velocity Ultra*, MD **James Marsden** is equally warm in his praise. "If you had to boil it down to one trait that makes developers respect and adore him, it's that he bloody well keeps his word. His team is tiny, yet he and his colleagues have managed to give PlayStation a compelling marketing story that is the most authentic narrative there is right now. The public perception that is growing around the PlayStation brand is that PlayStation cares – and a large proportion of that has been set into motion by Shahid's actions and initiative."

Such commitment comes at a price. "You need to be constantly available," says Ahmad, who's often on Twitter and Skype at unsociable hours. "It's not about service. It's more about mutual respect, understanding of the art, understanding of what [devs] are trying to do and being available."

> "If you boil it down to one trait that makes developers adore him, it's that he bloody well keeps his word"

Sony has been reaching out to indies more than ever for the coming console generation, and Ahmad's philosophies are at the heart of its courtship. "We've been doing this for years, but we're keen for people to realise the barriers are down, and that – although there's always going to be some process – we're here to help. And if that means it goes beyond the usual professional courtesies, then fine. I'm not going to watch the clock. You don't get anywhere that way. Scenes don't develop with a 'business as usual' mentality. There is no more business as usual," he says.

It helps that Ahmad has first-hand experience of indie development. Starting as a bedroom coder in 1982 – his most famous work is isometric adventure *Chimera* – he spent 15 years in development before moving into publishing at Virgin and Hasbro Interactive. He still dabbles in coding. Last year, he spent his commute on the route-98 London bus remastering *Chimera*. More recently, he's been teaching himself Open GL 3D programming. "Although I'm not the world's greatest C++ programmer, I have nevertheless released a simple game using it, having coded it on a bus with a full-time and rather demanding job," he says. "That's not too far off the life of some indies, actually, who have a day job that takes a lot out of them, but still have the passion to make a game in what little free time they have left. They can see that I share that passion and that I genuinely empathise and understand."

Passion, authenticity: these are watchwords Ahmad uses a lot. It's telling that he grew up religiously listening to Radio One DJ John Peel. Like Peel, Ahmad has the opportunity to discover new talent and bring it to the attention of a wider audience. But new talent is often skittish; the trick, it seems, is to offer it a safe haven.

"Authenticity is primarily a function of presence. If you're not present, people sense that you are in some way disingenuous. That kills trust," Ahmad says. "To move to the next phase in videogames, trust is going to work better than mistrust. Presence is the absence of distraction. Whatever I'm doing, I try to make an authentic impact and I commit with whatever I have."

As the next generation gets under way, Sony is gambling more than ever on its indie community, and Ahmad is passionately awaiting the results. "I'm excited that we're engaged with people who are going to define videogames for another generation; that we're no longer constrained by the formulaic; that at long, long last we are seeing a Cambrian explosion of creativity; and that I'm getting to be a witness to that – and, sometimes, a participant." ■



Places

BULLWORTH ACADEMY

Rockstar's smallest open world favours community over size

The generational leap between *Bully* and *GTAIV* means it's easy not to realise how detailed Bullworth felt at the time. What the location lacked in scale, it made up for in character and intricacy

From *Bully/Canis Canem Edit*
Developer Rockstar Vancouver
Origin Canada
First release 2006

Bullworth Academy exists because Rockstar reined itself in. The story of *Grand Theft Auto* in the PS2 era is one of ever-expanding boundaries, starting with the modestly proportioned islands of *GTAIII* and ending with *San Andreas*'s country and urban sprawl. But Bullworth Academy and the tiny New England town it's nestled within don't fit this trend. You can run the length of the grounds in minutes and do quick laps of the town on a skateboard. Released between *San Andreas* and Liberty City's colossal current-gen incarnation, Bullworth looks awkwardly, embarrassingly small.

It works, though, because when you're 15 your schoolyard stomping grounds, and the cliques and gangs populating them, are pretty much the extent of the known world. *Bully* (AKA *Canis Canem Edit*) taps into this feeling. Viewed that way, it can feel bigger than any *GTA*, blurring the line between open-world action title and *Persona*-style life sim. It's tempting to hunt for autobiographical elements in Bullworth – lead writer Dan Houser attended London's prestigious St Paul's School, and Jimmy Hopkins' alma mater is a similar bastion of privilege – but you won't spot anything conclusive. The academy blends a host of English and American influences to become curiously nonspecific.

Its neo-Gothic architecture could be found either side of the ocean, but the schoolyard factions – the nerds, preppies, greasers and jocks – clearly play to American high school dynamics, even if the greasers stick out anachronistically given the contemporary setting. Still, Jimmy's adventures, with their juvenile slapstick, are pure Beano: this is a Hollywood high school movie by way of Dennis The Menace and The Bash Street Kids. And, of course, there are the inescapable echoes of *Skool Daze*.

Bully offers something no other Rockstar title has managed, something that dramatically strengthens the sense that this – to use a phrase so often associated with open-world cities – is a living, breathing place: it exists in time. You can't help but notice the clock ticking in *Bully*, because you have classes to attend. Two per day, in fact, and Jimmy can unlock items and upgrades by completing these basic minigames. Jimmy's lax lesson schedule is a crucial part of the early game – the sense of obligation it provides and the penalties for truancy help underscore that you're not in the anarchical Liberty City any more. Mute thugs for hire can go wherever they please, but Jimmy Hopkins has an art lesson in ten minutes.



Bullworth's dining hall, with its long wooden benches and ornate decorations, wouldn't be out of place in an Oxbridge college

The simple rhythm of the school day in Bullworth – wake up, attend class, accept mission, attend class, squeeze in a second mission before bed – coupled with the ebb and flow of students in out of the buildings, adds real depth to Rockstar's simulation. This doesn't just look like a boarding school, it operates like one too, while the feeling that a day has passed adds an extra dash of thrill to sneaking past prefects after dark.

Mute thugs for hire can go wherever they please, but Jimmy Hopkins has an art lesson in ten minutes

Of course, if *Bully* stuck to that 24-hour schedule with no other changes, Bullworth would feel like an oddly static Groundhog Day, but Rockstar also offers a much grander sense of time passing. Progress through the story in *Bully* and seasons change. You'll first notice this when, in Chapter 1, Halloween decorations appear college-wide overnight. The world observes other holidays too, but it's the slow passing into winter and the dawning of spring that measures the passage of a school year. Strictly speaking, the effect is tied to progression, not a calendar, but it works all the same. Bullworth, unlike so many videogame worlds, routinely undergoes change.

At times, your life in Bullworth Academy doesn't recall *GTA* as much as it does *Animal Crossing*, another digital home where life ticks along in metronomic fashion. And like an idyllic, animal-filled village, Bullworth's inhabitants are all individuals too. It's easy to miss this at first, since far too many students shout their version of *GTA*'s pedestrian chatter in what can seem like the same nasal drawl, but Bullworth Academy is home to 60 students, all with personalities of their own.

Follow students around and they'll share secrets, character details, and gossip about other pupils. There's the cheerleader whose airy chat about other people's love lives devolves into talk of arson and suicide, the social outcast who admits to buying people presents so they will be his friends, and the nerd who keeps quoting Jabberwocky. Few of these characters have anything as prolonged as a storyline, and most are written with the complete lack of self-awareness that typifies so many of *GTA*'s comic relief bitparts. Disappointingly, Jimmy's interactions with them are limited to a set of *Fable*-esque gestures, ruling out real conversation. But still, these people aren't generic NPCs: they're characters. These pupils, teachers and townsfolk are all one of a kind, which gives *Bully* something you rarely find outside of *Animal Crossing* or *Harvest Moon* – a sense of community.

As *Bully* continues, the Academy diminishes in importance, with the surrounding town becoming Jimmy's turf. It's a slightly frustrating evolution into the scaled-down *GTA* structure that the early chapters manage to avoid. Even so, *Bully* never loses its charm. You still get lost in Liberty City and San Andreas: they're large and intricate, with no end of streets that must be learned. And you drive by minimap in *GTAIV*, because you can never know a city the way you knew your school. ■





Things

CORTANA

Considering the inhumanity of Halo's most human character

Cortana's design has shifted in step with the technical advances made by the series. From the blunt blockiness of her screen debut she becomes more womanly as the game progress, but her design wisely stops short of sexualisation

From *Halo* series
Developer Bungie/343 Industries
Origin US
Debut 2001

What is Cortana, the artificial intelligence that accompanies Master Chief through the *Halo* series? Is she a person or merely a thing? She speaks with the warmth and wit of a woman, and indeed her personality is based on the cloned brain of her creator, Dr Catherine Elizabeth Halsey. But she is also an AI construct, a hologram with no physical form or being, and with a life expectancy of just seven years. It's a question the series returns to over its course, pondering whether the close relationship that Master Chief – and, by inextricable association, the player – develops with a computer program is authentic and reciprocated, or illusory and one-way; whether Cortana is your companion because of duty or because of love.

Mother, teacher, goddess, nurse, damsel, comedienne, alarm clock: Cortana has many roles, some of which she occupies simultaneously. She predates the series, having been introduced to players by Bungie during the first game's production via a series of cryptic promotional emails. As such, there is a sense that she has always been there – before Master Chief, before us, ready to guide, instruct, direct and scold.

She is there at the beginning, when Master Chief is awoken from his first cryonic sleep and the pair escape the burning spaceship Pillar Of Autumn. She is there at the end of *Halo 4*, saving Master Chief's life at the cost of her own. The words she whispers into his ear during *Halo 3* ring true: "I am your shield; I am your sword. I know you, your past, your future."

But initially her presence is driven by a practical necessity. Modern military shooting games typically feed instructions to the player on where to be and what to do via support team members through an earpiece. Cortana is the futuristic equivalent, an onboard supporting officer able to relay the designer's instructions and objectives to the player using the game's voice. This creates a natural sense of companionship that is further heightened by Cortana's dialogue, which flits between chatty, witty and panicky. In this way, she can guide the player through space and time, a mostly reliable narrator who offers exposition and explanation, while bringing a persistent lively voice into a soundscape that's otherwise committed to destruction.

Her position as instructor invites you to place your trust in her, but what encourages the first shoots of honest intimacy is the sense that Cortana is in it with you; she may hold vital data about the giant ring-like structures that threaten life, but she is sentient, not omniscient. She makes decisions based on the discoveries you make together. And more importantly, the risks she asks you to take are equally shouldered between you both.



Voice actress Jen Taylor is as much responsible for the texture of Cortana's character as her designers and scriptwriters

Still, is this not the role of any computer program designed to aid and support, protect and serve humans? Bungie blurs the lines between duty and choice by revealing that Cortana wasn't assigned Master Chief but instead selected him herself. "They let me pick," she says. "Did I ever tell you that? Choose whichever Spartan I wanted. You know me. I did my research. Watched as you became the soldier we needed you to be. Like the others, you were strong and swift and brave. A natural leader. But you had something they didn't. Something no one saw but me." In a series often criticised for its convoluted backstory and slippery plots, Cortana provides a grounding of intimacy and tenderness.

> There is a sense that Cortana has always been there – before Master Chief, before us, ready to guide

Having established such a close connection between Master Chief and Cortana in the first and second games, it was perhaps inevitable that Bungie would split the pair up to provide a personal focus for your struggle to save the world. Indeed, *Halo* may be a series about saving the galaxy – from the Covenant, from the Flood, and from every other would-be space invader – but it's curiously devoid of people to save.

There are the marines who accompany Master Chief on the odd mission, identikit grunts that you sometimes grow attached to. Lose one of these uniformed men or women and you'll lose a helping assault rifle, not to mention welcome chatter. Nevertheless their deaths are inconsequential, unnoted by *Halo*'s story or systems. And the great mass of humanity for whom you must finish the fight is left to the imagination.

So Cortana becomes the one you must save, rescuing her from a crashed ship in *Halo 3* and then, more urgently, from the Rampancy degeneration that's threatening to take her life in the fourth game. Here, her mental deterioration – articulated wonderfully by Jen Taylor – offers the driving force behind a story that is bulky but otherwise weightless. In a universe that casts you as a human weapon trying to save an absent people, Cortana provides an answer to the question at the heart of all fiction: why?

In *Halo 4*'s closing moments, Master Chief, in the grip of honest grief, apologises to Cortana, revealing the truth that it was her that he wanted to save over the world: "It was my job to take care of you." Cortana replies, in a hoarse whisper: "We were supposed to take care of each other. And we did." In this moment it becomes clear that *Halo* is a love story without romance. Using the last of her strength, Cortana projects a hard light version of herself into the scene, allowing genuine contact with Master Chief for the first time in order to say goodbye. And so the thing finally becomes a person. ■



STUDIO PROFILE

People Can Fly

How Epic's buyout freed the Polish developer to bring straight-up shooters into the 21st century

1 People Can Fly's first game, *Painkiller*, was a very death metal version of Hell. 2 *Bulletstorm* took its lead from *Gears Of War*'s heavyweight character design but added a lick of colour and a sense of humour. 3 *Judgment*'s art duties were shared between People Can Fly's Polish team and Epic in North Carolina. Production of 2D and 3D art on the same character was often divided between the two studios



Founded 2002
Employees 60
Key staff Sebastian Wojciechowski (general manager), Wojciech Mądry (lead level designer)
URL www.peoplecanfly.com
Selected softography *Painkiller, Bulletstorm, Gears Of War: Judgment*
Current projects TBA

When Epic's majority share in People Can Fly became a full acquisition in August 2012, the studio gained floor space, lost key developers and needed a new manager. The departure of founder and co-owner Adrian Chmielarz left space at the top of the Warsaw-based studio, and the position was filled in the most egalitarian manner.

"I've never been through anything like that," says general manager **Sebastian Wojciechowski**, the man who filled the post. "There were five different stages, including an interview by the entire company. I met all the people here before joining them. They actually voted on who would join them, which is absolutely fantastic."

The former technology and radio executive brought no game industry expertise to People Can Fly but was given the seal of approval from a team that, even 11 years after the studio opened, still retains more than a dozen developers that worked on its first game, *Painkiller*. Wojciechowski's arrival signalled a period of expansion for the studio, with work on *Gears Of War: Judgment* continuing as walls were demolished, new floors were laid and surfaces were coated in fresh paint. The transformation was a transition from independent developer to Epic's own Polish studio – the climax of a process that had begun five years earlier. In 2006, work on unannounced 360/PS3 survival horror title *Come Midnight* ended with the game's cancellation by publisher THQ, and People Can Fly was forced to return to its roots, but with new lessons taken from its abandoned project informing development on the next game.

"Every single thing we work on makes us better," lead level designer **Wojciech Mądry** says. "*Come Midnight* taught us how to make games like *Gears Of War* – thirdperson shooters and so on. *Come Midnight* was the moment we built the studio we're in today. It was half this space, but it was the moment we went from garage production like 'Hey, Joe, can you make this?' to 'OK, John, please tell your team to…' The scale [changed]. We are very proud of every single project we've made, whether it's seen the light of day or not."

"There's still a lot of pride in [that project] even though it never saw the light of day," American ex-pat art director **Waylon Brinck** says. "There are *Come Midnight* posters up around the office. One guy has a *Come Midnight* ringtone on his cellphone. Even though it didn't ship, the guys are really proud of it."



Xbox 360 title *Gears Of War: Judgment*, released in March, was built by People Can Fly to beat Epic at its own game

Facing "some issues" with the proprietary engine used for *Painkiller* and in search of a new project, the studio approached Epic with its own Unreal Engine 3 demo. "We fell back to how we thought of *Painkiller*," Mądry says. "We made a short demo [to show what we could do] and when Epic saw it, they were like, 'We want those guys to work for us'. At first we couldn't believe that *the* Epic wanted to work with us, but we started talking and everyone here fell in love with *Gears 1*." People Can Fly's PC port of *Gears Of War* shipped in November 2007, adding back in a level cut from the original 360 version. Months earlier, in August, Epic had bought a majority share in the studio, effectively guaranteeing its future stability but permanently changing the studio's sense of self. "We were this Polish studio and we had to adapt," Mądry says. "We were part of a bigger family. We evolved quite a lot and learned quite a lot and there were a lot of changes. But they were more related to the environment culture and not the games, because games were something we did in a similar way [from the start] – quality over all else."

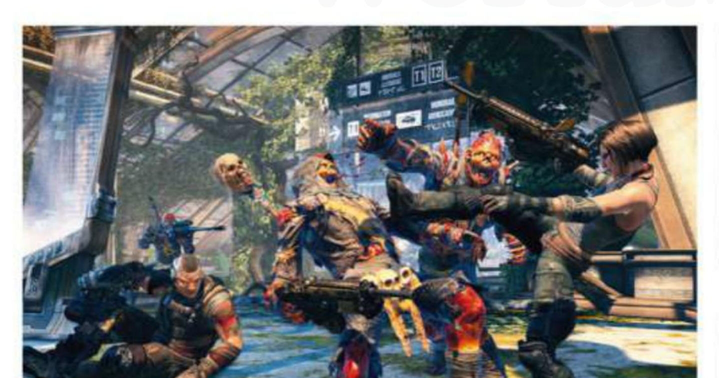
> "At Epic, everyone has creative input. It's like everyone is encouraged to bring something to the table"

Working with Epic's North Carolina studio offered new opportunities for the team, too. "At Epic everyone has creative input," Mądry says. "It's like everyone is encouraged to be creative, to bring something to the table. *Painkiller* was more one person telling everyone 'You do this, you do that', and it's been great to actually create something and not just *do* something. This was the most shocking thing for me and it's been the greatest experience ever since. There's nothing so inspiring as people who are so boldly into what they're doing that they just don't stop; they're working to make every inch better because it's theirs – their creation – and they're allowed to push this."

People Can Fly assisted North Carolina on *Gears Of War 2*, but the studio's next game was undeniably its own. *Bulletstorm* was a loud, obnoxious, ultraviolent shooter designed with laser precision by a team that understood how to get the maximum possible value from the simplest design. *Painkiller* was among the first shooters to place such an emphasis on physics, and seven years later that emphasis found its natural conclusion. *Bulletstorm*'s Havok physics would be the key to making the most of every kill – launching enemies onto spikes, detonating entire crowds with flying hotdog carts, bouncing soldiers into the maws of carnivorous plants – and rewarding players with constant spectacle backed up by a fruit-machine cascade of points and kill-themed awards. It was a critical success but sold just under a million copies; for publisher EA, it was a commercial failure.

"I think that any time you've done your best and read the critical excitement but it doesn't translate into financial success, you feel that maybe there's something you could have done differently," Mądry says. "But that was the most successful new IP that year! The problem is, like with the movie industry, the most money is made by [sequels]. In the end we did everything we could to make a great game, a game that we would want to play, and there's nothing we were ashamed of or wanted to change. We did everything we could."

Bulletstorm demonstrated the creative smarts and technical mastery of People Can Fly's team. Few studios are able to get so much value from Unreal 3, and the Polish team's work with the engine arguably bettered Epic's own *Gears of War 3*, released seven months after *Bulletstorm* in September 2011. People Can Fly was entrusted with *Gears Of War: Judgment*, where many of *Bulletstorm*'s design decisions were





***Gears Of War: Judgment* was designed by People Can Fly, but the six-hour time difference between Poland and Epic in North Carolina meant the game could be developed almost 24 hours a day. In the studio's central hub, a row of clocks show the time at Epic's various studios**

vindicated, albeit within the confines of a more bankable commercial success. The initial game design, shaped by creative director Adrian Chmielarz, took *Bulletstorm*'s score-attack philosophy and forced it upon *Gears Of War*'s cover-shooter template – in a way that felt so natural that previous *Gears* games now feel empty without it – but *Judgment* would have to be completed without Chmielarz's direction. In August 2012 Epic completed its acquisition of the studio and Chmielarz departed to form The Astronauts with animator Michal Kosieradzki and artist Andrzej Poznanski.

"Adrian was by far the most visible, identifiable [member of the team]," Mądry says. "But I can assure you we still have 60 very talented veterans that enjoy working here. This is part of the industry: people moving on, having strong creative visions, trying to create new things, and not necessarily [working] with all the people [they were with] before. I don't think that we were devastated or anything like that, it's just a part of how this works."

Gears Of War: Judgment was produced in close collaboration with Epic's North Carolina studio. There would be daily communication via videoconferencing, art duties would be divided between east and west, and the studio was given *Gears Of War 3* as a base from which *Gears Of War: Judgment* would begin. "We were able to start prototyping on day one," Brinck says. "Our new Overrun Mode was up and running within the first week or two. It was great to build on it, but as it was a side story it was also our chance to bring some of our own ideas for the gameplay and the setting. I think all our craziest ideas actually made it in! We kind of wanted to beat Epic at its own game; make a better *Gears* game than even Epic had made."

"We are truly 21st-century companies," Wojciechowski says. "We're using means of communication that allow us to collaborate on daily basis even though we've got this timezone difference. And it actually sometimes helps because we can share resources and work almost around the clock. There are different [kinds of] investors in strategy – some are just taking care of their dividend rates at the end of the fiscal year, but we're in touch every day and they're not only taking care of [finance] but also whether the people here feel comfortable and whether we have enough resources to be efficient and creative."

Gears Of War: Judgment sold more on one platform than *Bulletstorm* had on three, but with just over one million copies sold it still underperformed for Microsoft. In the same month, Sony struggled to match *God Of War 3*'s numbers with *God Of War: Ascension*, bringing to an end two series that served as landmarks for the generation – technical showpieces on both sides. It's hard to blame People Can Fly for the modesty of *Bulletstorm*'s and *Judgment*'s success: both games challenged the status quo of their genre and pushed UE3 to its limits. The studio has yet to announce its first post-Chmielarz game, and whether the studio will continue to successfully layer classic score-driven gameplay onto modern templates in the face of consumer apathy is uncertain – but for now People Can Fly remains, resolutely, People Can Fly.

Bulletstorm demonstrated the creative smarts and technical mastery of People Can Fly's team

"It's like the younger-older brother [relationship]," Mądry says, when asked if he thinks of the studio as Epic Warsaw. "We're the crazy ones, they're the experienced ones, and there's this friendly back and forth. I think I'd always call us People Can Fly, but if we're the younger brother, the family name would be Epic."

"That's a very good explanation. We are the younger brother in this Epic family," Wojciechowski says.

Brinck laughs. "The younger, more handsome brother," he concludes. ■





Wojciech Mądry
Lead level designer

How many people were there at People Can Fly in 2002 when work began on *Painkiller*?
I think it was about seven people, maybe ten. We had a lot of good ideas, and after we'd created the initial level – something we could present – we got a publisher, Dreamcatcher. Once we had financing, we could start hiring people to fill the gaps. Those first three or five months were really interesting. It was like surfing without knowing how: it felt cool but at the same time we didn't know how it'd end.

In an interview in 2003 Adrian [Chmielarz] predicted physics would be a big part of games. Turns out he was right. Was that a big feeling in the studio at the time?
Yes. I remember the first time I encountered physics in games. It was something like *Hitman*, I believe, and they used their own code, no Havok or anything, for when you were dragging a body. And it was like, "Oh my God, it's so real!" The problem is those things, over time, tend to lose their value for players. They take more and more for granted.

PCF seems to particularly value pushing technical limitations, whether in Unreal Engine 3 or using Havok in *Painkiller*.
It was always: ask yourself what you want to create, what experience, and then look at what can actually deliver this kind of experience to the players. So at that time, Havok was the only way to really deliver those great boss battles and environments. And obviously that's no longer the case, as PhysX has become a big part of many games and solutions.

How advantageous was it for you to set up the studio in Warsaw?
Two of the best universities that produce software engineers are based here in Warsaw, so that's a natural source of talent. And of those people that learn programming, quite a few want to make something a little more crazy than just coding databases. So that's a good starting point. Of course, when we started PCF there were no game development studios here – I started off as a software engineer myself.





THE MAKING OF...

Where's My Water?

How the creation of a sewer-dwelling, shower-loving alligator called Swampy gave Disney a bite of the mobile market

Swampy, hero of iOS and Android hit *Where's My Water?*, is the first Disney character to star in a mobile game. He's clean, smiley and adorable, the total opposite of what you'd expect a sewer-dwelling gator to be

Format iOS, Android
Publisher Disney Mobile
Developer Creature Feep
Origin US
Release 2011

Tim FitzRandolph has a dream. In that dream, he arrives at Disneyland in California with his six-year-old daughter just in time to watch the parade of Disney characters marching down Main Street USA. All the well-known faces are there – Mickey, Cinderella, Buzz Lightyear and the rest – but in FitzRandolph's dream, there's an extra character bringing up the rear: a green alligator called Swampy, the star of Disney Mobile's smash hit game *Where's My Water?*

"If you went to Disneyland and sat down for the parade, and one of the things that came by was a character from a game I worked on, that would be incredible," says FitzRandolph, the game's lead designer and VP of creative at Disney Mobile. "Oh, man, that would be amazing."

It's not a pipe dream. Since its launch in September 2011, *Where's My Water?* has racked up more than 200 million downloads, even knocking the feathered furies of *Angry Birds* off the iTunes Store's top spot for paid apps. More than just a game, it's a cross-media franchise spawning two sequels – *Where's My Perry?* and, more recently, *Where's My Mickey?* – a web cartoon series, and a tonne of merchandise from plushies and backpacks to clothing and even iPhone covers. "We call it a 'synergy title'," says **Bart Decrem**, Disney Mobile's head of creative end product.

While FitzRandolph's dream of meeting a life-sized Swampy in the shadow of Sleeping Beauty Castle isn't yet a reality, it's surely only a matter of time. "From what I understand, it's not out of the question," he says. "Discussions are moving forward but I don't know what point they're at." Swampy, the first Disney character ever to launch on a mobile device, has redefined how the company sees the mobile sector. How ironic, then, that he wasn't even the starting point for the creators of *Where's My Water?*.

When the idea of an alligator living in the sewers was pitched, everyone dismissed it as too outlandish

Decrem joined Disney Mobile in 2010 after the company acquired his startup Tapulous, creator of the hit iOS music game *Tap Tap Revenge*. Back then, the mobile sector was just beginning to explode. "When I came to Disney, the mandate was really to articulate a vision and strategy for Disney to be relevant on iPhones and then tablets as they came out," he explains. "When I joined, there were maybe 200 million of these devices out there. Now, three years later, we're at 1.5 billion."



A simple touchscreen 'digging' mechanic belies the richness of *Where's My Water?*'s physics-driven puzzle gameplay

With new leadership in place, Disney Mobile turned its attention from setting up licensing deals with external developers to in-house development. Among the talent headhunted from other parts of the Mouse House was FitzRandolph, who was working as a designer on console titles like *Toy Story 3* at Disney's Avalanche Software in Salt Lake City, Utah.

In his spare time, FitzRandolph had made *Jelly Car*, a cute and wobbly physics driving game for iOS and Xbox 360 (Disney later picked up the series). Increasingly more interested in playing and building mobile titles than console ones, he jumped at the chance to join a new Disney Mobile dev team – named Creature Feep – in sunny Glendale, California.

Creature Feep's first game was *Jelly Car 3*, a sequel that allowed the team get to know each other before tackling a new IP. Aware that their expertise lay in casual physics games, the group started brainstorming their first original game once *JC3* had shipped.

"*Where's My Water?* started out as just 'Water'," remembers FitzRandolph of those early spitballing sessions. "We thought fluid simulation could be cool, and it was underrepresented in the App Store and in gaming generally at the time. At first we thought the fluid itself could maybe be a character you were guiding around, but then we had a session where we drew a side view of an ant farm-style cutaway, and we thought about touching the screen to cut the dirt [in order to make the water flow]."

Uncertain whether it was worth spending the time coding a complex fluid physics simulation, the team put together a prototype in Unity. "We put in a bunch of spheres with no friction on them to simulate how water would bounce and flow around. Then we quickly made a thing where you could cut away dirt with your finger." Immediately the team came up with over a dozen puzzle ideas, and realised they had a potential game.

While working on an engine in C++ and OpenGL, with a custom-built fluid simulation, the group also started thinking hard about the design of the game itself. "We asked the Disney question," Decrem says, "and the Disney question is: 'Why are you cutting through soil? What's going on down there?'"

Early iterations focused on cute little seedlings, buried under the ground, that needed water; a great visual clue for letting players instantly understand the purpose of moving the water, but not very rich in terms of character. When the idea of an alligator living in the sewers – a riff on the old New York City urban legend about a pet gator flushed down the toilet – was pitched, everyone dismissed it as too outlandish.

The alternatives they came up with proved even weirder, though. "We had one idea for an alien world," FitzRandolph remembers. "There were these aliens who slept underground and their alarm clock was broken, so you had to splash them with water. We would get into this loop where we tried to explain some aspect that justified the game and, in explaining it, created a thousand more questions." Returning to the alligator in the sewers, the team started mocking up pictures – and finally realised that they'd hit on something special.

"The Swampy thing was unexpected," Decrem remembers. "I remember my boss calling me, just a few weeks before the game launched, from Animal Kingdom at Disney World Florida. He said: 'Hey, I'm looking at an alligator and he looks like he wants to eat me. Are you sure you can build an alligator that's cuddly and fun and friendly?'" Reversing expectations was the secret behind Swampy's success. Living underground, desperate for water to trickle through the pipes so he can have a shower, he isn't the grubby, scary gator of legend, but an adorable dude with a rubber duck who just wants to get clean. Take

one look at Swampy, waiting expectantly under the showerhead, and you can immediately guess what the game is asking you to do. Unlike traditional movie-licensed games – which start with a character and then retrofit gameplay around them – *Where's My Water?* made a virtue of finding the right character for its gameplay.

It helped that the game was so intuitive – something that grew out of the physics-based mechanics. "Making a game with physics at its core is a shortcut to making a really accessible game," says FitzRandolph, "because it kind of behaves how you expect. That means it can be inherently accessible to a super-wide audience – not worrying about culture, about age, about background. If you've seen water flow growing up, you're pretty much prepped to play the game."

For the team, the technical challenge centred on the fluid simulation itself and the need to create an environment that the player could cut into dynamically. Onscreen, it seems deceptively simple. Under the hood, however, the model is more complex than it looks to the casual observer. The water is comprised of tiny particles governed by certain parameters like viscosity and pressure. Each particle attracts or repels other particles, depending on the distance between them, to create a realistic model of how water works.

Accessibility was also a key consideration when it came to designing the game's puzzles, which feature everything from tainted water to fast-growing algae and switches. "We decided you should be able to describe each puzzle in a sentence," says the designer.

"The key was that you have a relatively small number of elements that make up all the possibilities in the game. You only have a few fluids types, a few kinds of materials. We tried to keep the number of gimmicks like switches and moving objects to a small number. So, in theory, all the pieces that make up the puzzles the players can keep in their brain at one time. It's not too much, not overwhelming. But if you draw lines between all the things that interact with each other you get a really complex, messy graph."

Aiming to make players feel smart for solving puzzles – and encouraging them to succeed – the team worked hard to hit a sweet spot that would appeal to a variety of players, regardless of whether they were six or 60. As Decrem puts it: "A great Disney movie, like John Lasseter [director of Toy Story and Cars, and now chief creative officer at Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios] says, makes the world a little brighter. [For us], a great puzzle develops your brain, gives you a sense of accomplishment. You feel like you're learning and growing in a way that's really fun and rich. To me, that part of it is very Disney. You come out and it feels like the world is a little better, you're a little better and you think a little bigger."

Disney is used to spending hundreds of millions of dollars launching new IP and new characters. Each new movie or TV show is a huge financial gamble for the company. *Where's My Water?* cost a fraction of that, yet it succeeded in launching a character who is now recognisable around the world.

For Decrem, what's significant about the mobile sector is that it lets Disney be experimental. "Creating new IP and new characters and worlds really is the lifeblood of The Walt Disney Company," he says. "One of the things that's interesting is that on the App Store, on these new platforms, you can have a small group of people create what is essentially an experimental title and see how it does. If it resonates, you can put the whole company behind it."

Q&A

Tim FitzRandolph
Game design director, Where's My Water?

How did *Jelly Car* feed into *Where's My Water?*
Well, we looked at *Jelly Car* and felt there were things that could have let a wider audience enjoy that game. It was pretty complex to control, and it didn't have any characters. It didn't have much personality to it – it was a bit abstract. So we thought if we could come up with a casual physics game that had those elements, that would be really cool and we could reach more people.

So that was the starting point for Swampy?
Creating a new character was something we felt like we were less guaranteed to be successful at [than physics-based gameplay]. People's instinct is to come up with an interesting character, then bend the game to fit them. But Swampy exists initially to make the game easy to understand. The fact that he's interesting and fun is like this wonderful bonus.

Is that why the title focuses on the gameplay, not the character?
When we named the game, we were really struggling. Should we involve the name of the character in the title, like 'Swampy's Sewer'? Or should it be about what you do in the game? We were unsure if anyone would actually remember his name, because we don't have a chance to say it very frequently in the game. A lot of people just refer to him as 'that alligator'!

When *Where's My Water?* was released in September 2011, the game was only available on iPhone, and it didn't even feature in-app commerce elements. "There was not a lot of support from the company when it launched," Decrem explains. "But when people started playing it and it became successful, then the video group came to us and there was an opportunity with YouTube. Out of that came a video series, with more than 50 million views of the Swampy shorts on Disney.com and YouTube. A whole line of merchandise [was launched] when Disney consumer products got excited. The company basically put itself behind it."

This 'bottom up' approach enabled Disney to build a new brand in the mobile sector that could then expand to other areas of the company. "The MVP [Minimal Viable Product] approach is all the rage in Silicon Valley," Decrem says. "What it says is, 'try to build the smallest, simplest version of your product that delivers the essential thing and nothing else'. The advantages of that are focus and speed and cost. In the case of *Where's My Water?*, that meant building just the iPhone game. Don't have any in-app commerce, barely any Facebook integration, don't worry about making a theme show or merchandise – just nail the core gameplay. By not worrying about a franchise plan and all of that stuff, but instead focusing on really nailing the game, you can go and build on success when you have a hit."

With the boom of the mobile sector, particularly abroad in non-western countries, *Where's My Water?* is emblematic of how Disney is reaching out to a new kind of consumer. "What we have, for the first time in history, is essentially a network that reaches more than a billion people where we can talk to who we call 'guests' directly, without an intermediary to really speak of," Decrem explains. "Essentially a whole generation of kids in the western market – and adults in, for example, India or China – are being introduced to Disney characters and worlds through this medium."

Where's My Water? may be a casual game, but for Disney it's part of a very serious growth strategy into new worldwide markets and mediums. With the *Where's My...?* series already expanding beyond Swampy to embrace Disney's biggest icon Mickey Mouse, what does the future hold? Decrem has an ambitious vision: "We are somewhere around over 200 million downloads [with *Where's My Water?*]. The goal is to reach a billion people. We're not there yet." ■



This sketch by artists Vincent Perea and Shane Zalvin captures Swampy's quirkiness: he'd much rather stay in the nice, clean boat than swim in the sewer, much to his friends' amusement





ABOVE **Disney Mobile's commitment to adding new content has been impressive. *Cranky's Story*, featuring Swampy's bullying nemesis, arrived in January 2012. *Allie's Story*, starring Swampy's girlfriend, was released in May.**
BELOW **Plenty of Swampy merchandise can be found on the desks at Disney Mobile's offices in California**





Cranky is Swampy's mean, green nemesis. He has his own spin-off DLC and appears in the 'Swampy's Underground Adventure' webisodes, where he battles with Swampy for the affections of his cute gator girlfriend, Allie



Disney's iconic character gets a retro makeover in *Where's My Mickey?*, which proves to be a charming addition to the *Where's My…?* series

Mouse hunt

If *Where's My Water?* was the little game that could, *Where's My Mickey?* is its blockbuster cousin. Announced in a fanfare of publicity at E3 alongside a new series of 19 short cartoons, *Where's My Mickey?* scales up the previous game by featuring the Mouse House's most iconic character. Using the core of *Where's My Water?*'s physics-based fluid simulation puzzles, it takes the series out of the sewers and above ground, as you bring water to Mickey so he can make lemonade and put out fires. "*Where's My Water?* is a proven game and Mickey is probably the most beloved character in the world," Decrem says. "So you can afford to make a bigger investment, involve more people. We launched on three platforms and in 12 languages because you already know it's going to be a hit, and because the company and the world expects broad support and broad availability." *Where's My Mickey?* hasn't forgotten its roots, though, or the trailblazers that made it all possible – both Swampy and Perry the Platypus from *Where's My Perry?* have cameos in the trailer for the latest game (see it at www.bit.ly/121Sk1K).

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

That old 'pew pew pew' feeling

Playing mouse-and-keyboard games is something I really can't do any more. About 13 years ago I injured my back and shoulders – a case of overenthusiastic yoga – and developed a sciatica-like condition in my hands and arms. It comes and goes, mostly depending on strain and how often I get to an osteopath. But when I hold my fingers like a cat perched over my WASD, I later regret it.

But sometimes I give it a go anyway, because a game comes out that I think is worth risking it for. Recently, it was *BioShock Infinite*, a game that my Twitter feed raved about for a week. I installed a Windows partition on my Mac just to play it.

And what a marvel it was to behold. It ran at full resolution on my Retina-enabled screen (an incredible 2,880x1,800 for those keeping score) and it was so beautiful that it was the kind of game that made me stop and look at raindrops. The sort of view that onomatopoeia would call 'lush'. I drank it in, wandered through the streets, watching whole buildings bob up and down among the clouds.

It felt like that first time I stared out over the landscape of Phobos when playing *Doom* 19 years ago, or New York in *Deus Ex*, or Wake Island in *Battlefield 1942*. That old feeling of walking through a world seen through a screen three feet from your face (it's not quite the same as on console and TV), drinking it in, getting scared, peeking around corners and wondering how much ammunition you have left.

Yet as a recent immigrant to the US, I find myself thinking on the phrase, "You can never go home." I've moved country twice, once from Dublin to London for over ten years; more recently (by dint of the Green Card lottery) to Seattle. I miss both cities equally and consider both my home. But you can't ever go back, not really.

When you do it's different, but also the same. The different bits weird you out and the samey bits irritate you endlessly. And that's also how I feel playing *BioShock*. The nostalgia of its beauty kind of weirds me out a little, with bloom upon bloom. Meanwhile, the valence of interaction with the world is decidedly in the negative.

That experience of walking up to videogame characters that inertly repeat stock phrases at you.



I find that I cannot go back to a time when I was more tolerant of bugs, breaks, sops and cheesy nods to necessity

That business of endlessly searching bodies and stealing every pfennig you find. That sensation of walking through a digital Madame Tussauds and finding weapon-vending machines and upgrade powers that make little sense. That realisation that it may look glorious, but really the depth of the fiction is no greater than was that of *Rise Of The Triads* and its priest porridge health pickups.

And once realisation dawns, the question that arises is whether the frame (the mechanics, etc) is any good, because that's all there really is. As high-definition tropes reveal themselves to be much the same as the tropes of yesteryear, it comes down to whether the old 'pew pew pew' of shooting gameplay is worth doing. It's all right. Enough to pass the time.

Aside from wrist pains, my problem is that I've seen this all before. Although I try, I find that I cannot go back to a time when I used to have the ability to believe more easily, and was more tolerant of the bugs, breaks, sops and cheesy nods to necessity in games. Where I might have considered the breakability of the system in an *Elder Scrolls* game something to be ignored in 1995, in 2013 it jarred me.

And it's not just shooters where I find my expectations changing. I find roleplaying games awfully bombastic – and this from a guy who was a D&D fiend into his mid-20s. I find racing games very so-so. I find several of the newly minted 'zine' style of interactive artwork perhaps a little less interesting than I might have two decades ago, because their messages are rather obvious.

I believe in games, but I find that the games of my youth no longer interest me. For the younger generation, no doubt what it is playing all feels so very significant right now. Yet for me, I find that as I grow older I become more and more fascinated by elegance, robustness and coherence. I want games about the simple interaction leading to extended fun and delight, delivered with artistry.

I'm talking about games like *Rez* and *Journey*, iPad games like *Triple Town* and contained games like *Papers, Please*. I'm talking about what I've often called 'thauma' in these pages, a sense of coherent believability that goes beyond immersion or flow. I'm talking about wanting to play in the leanest of worlds with the most wonderful mechanics, and finding joy in small things.

There is power in playing and a numinous sense unique to games that arises from knowing that a world might exist beyond its physical boundaries. There is incalculable depth of meaning to be derived from the simplest action as long as it is robust. As long as the frame does not become apparent quickly.

The old 'pew pew pew' is probably better kept in the nostalgia file. As I grow older, I find my continued love affair with games-as-art goes in new directions. There is magic in those digital worlds we make, for all ages, and that magic is often surprising in how much it does with so little.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com




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In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Games that mean nothing

Last month I wrote about the value of themes, and I lamented that the majority of triple-A games released today essentially do not present coherent ones. I feel that without a consistent theme, a work has nothing to say (or perhaps, in the case of a game, it has nothing to discuss), and is therefore limited to being consumed and enjoyed in the moment without further consideration and with no lasting impact.

Recently, more and more thematically coherent works have been coming out of the indie space, and have contributed to the general broadening of the sorts of themes games seem able to explore. A game such as *Papers, Please* explores the themes of immigration, terrorism, national security and profiling both through the dynamics of gameplay and its narrative elements. The coherence of its exploration of these themes makes the investigation of similar material in whatever multibillion-dollar covert war fighting FPS franchise you can think of seem laughable.

Of course, it's fine to just be entertained. Games still have tremendous value as a form of entertainment that does not need to ask for, or reward, any deeper contemplation. It's totally OK to make a game where you take on the role of a special forces soldier sent covertly into the sovereign territory of another nation to kill non-uniformed, non-military enemy combatants who are trying to repel you from their homes, as long as you don't actually say anything about such a conflict. After all, we don't want to make people uncomfortable; we want to keep the simulation of the state-sanctioned illegal murder of foreign nationals lighthearted and fun – like playing Whac-A-Mole after eating too much candyfloss and riding the rollercoaster.

Blockbuster franchises simply are not the place for meaningful themes; this has been proven time and again in film and literature. Lord Of The Rings is a sweeping epic about little hairy men fighting an ancient and evil demonic power. It's about how cool rangers are, and the fact that elves and dwarves can never get along unless they're killing orcs, trolls or goblins – all of whom deserve to be killed. It has swordfighting, wizards, chases and all manner of imaginary monsters. A major entertainment franchise that needs to give you all



It's not just western culture that demonstrates popular entertainment is best when kept free of troubling themes

of that is never going to succeed if it tries to present some pretentious theme such as the need to value and protect nature from exploitation through industry and technology. Everything that is great about Lord Of The Rings would collapse under the weight of such a theme.

This is not just a modern-day truth, either. Bram Stoker's Dracula is a fantastically thrilling horror story about an ancient evil who can turn into a shadow or a pile of rats, and who needs to be killed (for real, this time) before he steals the hero's fiancé. But that's not easy – Dracula can fly, control wolves and bats with his mind, and keeps a harem of succubi around to ensure the potential for a hot sex scene. He's bulletproof, incredibly rich, has a royal title, and he sleeps in a coffin – how cool is that? Clearly, no one at the time would have even read the book if its themes addressed the fetishisation of Christian belief and ritual. And had it been about those sorts of pretentious ideas, we would certainly not be reading it today. But thankfully, Dracula is nothing more than a horror story with some dirty bits.

And it's not just western culture that repeatedly demonstrates popular entertainment is best when kept free of potentially troubling themes. The popularity of the Godzilla films in Japan in the '50s and '60s show us that nobody wants anything serious to think about when it comes to watching giant monsters trample buses, knock down buildings and incinerate tanks with atomic breath. The idea of destroying an entire city is preposterous outside the context of giant monsters from some undiscovered ocean trench, invaders from an imaginary alien world, or perhaps *Civilization* or *Sim City*.

Imagine the absurdity of a bunch of Hoplites hiding in a wooden horse to infiltrate a city, or of barbarians riding elephants over Alps. Imagine just how many planes and bombs it would take to completely incinerate even a modestly sized European city – never mind the staggering power it would require to turn a city into a crater in the blink of an eye. The idea that Godzilla had some deeper theme that spoke to Japanese fears about America's growing nuclear arsenal following WWII is ridiculous. The Godzilla movies were nothing more than monster movies.

No, I say leave the pretentious and self-serving idea that games could be about stuff to the so-called 'indies' so they can all fail and come back to work for the real game industry. If people want serious, emotionally moving or challenging content, they have other places to go for that. Go see a film by that European director, or go listen to music by that chick from a country that has two months with no sun. Games are different. They aren't there to get in our faces and try to make us get all emotional. Games are entertainment, plain and simple, and anything that interferes with my in-the-moment enjoyment of decapitating an orc is an insult to the modern gamer.

Clint Hocking lives in Seattle and blogs at clicknothing.com. Last month he dared to suggest games be about something

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

The Cthulhu challenge

There are a great number of reasons that I should be ashamed, but the one that is uppermost in my mind at the moment is that I first found out about Cthulhu from the Internet. Until very recently, I had never read any HP Lovecraft. This classic invention from a golden age of scariness has rightfully endured and thrived without me ever knowing about it.

Having discovered the betentacled being, I am moved to wonder why there have only ever been a few games about the squishy beast. For example, Headfirst Productions' *Call Of Cthulhu: Dark Corners Of The Earth* was released in all good ruined undersea kingdoms in 2005. It was not deemed a commercial success.

Why hasn't classic literature been a rich and successful seam of videogame content? Can it be that people don't read it? I have to say it's something I know about, more than I actually know well, because I am too lazy to read it – and besides, Bargain Hunt is on in a minute. Or is it because such dark, old-fashioned worlds simply don't translate to games? I don't think it's the latter, because there is a shuffling undead legion of scary games that immerse you with pinpoint accuracy and scare your knickers off.

Perhaps the problem with *Dark Corners Of The Earth* was that Headfirst heavily (but not exclusively) used the firstperson style, and that doesn't sit well with the heavy narrative of the stories. Certainly, the game wasn't big on free will and lateral thinking. It stayed pretty true to Lovecraft's novella The Shadow Over Innsmouth, which meant that it played out rather like a script. Perhaps that was too big a problem.

Oh, I know what is: tonnes of stuff happens in, near or under the sea, and watery games tend not to do well. There. Mystery solved. That is why my idea for *Bloop! The Game* failed to sell. Well, that and the fact that after the 'bloop' noise is heard from the inky depths, nothing else happens. I think it might need a love interest.

Back to the classics, though. Games like *Resident Evil* and *BioShock* and many others show that you can successfully conjure terrifying atmospheres – and Lovecraft, Poe and their chums are all about that, their plots to be read by guttering. Sorry, by guttering *candlelight*. But really even the scariest games simply throw more, ever-faster zombies and monsters at you as the action ramps up towards the end, and this is the opposite of what a lot of the old horror men wrote – theirs was the power of the slow unshackling of sanity and the creeping banality of a world being taken over gently, bit by creeping bit. There doesn't have to be the vast pyrotechnical showdown you see in games.



Why hasn't classic literature been a rich and successful seam of game content? Can it be that people don't read it?

Mainly, though, we want our games to be set now, or in the future. When you're talking about interactive experiences, science fiction and action are far better bedfellows than psychologically debilitating fear and people who exclaim "hoi!" when things go wrong. Plus if you're going to hide Cthulhu, for example, you're cheating. You're selling the game to people who want to see him, and shove an RPG up his bum. But the Cthulhu that you'd see will never be anything less that a disappointment. Lovecraft himself drew a picture of Cthulhu in the 1930s. OK, he never claimed to be an artist, but if you see the image it will inevitably put you in mind of a glum bloke with hives being sick on a toilet.

The truly great games of the future will, I hope, nod in deference to the classics (by which I mean they'll steal the best bits, as long as they actually work in a gameworld) and they'll do something utterly new. I am so sick of zombies I can barely keep my brains down. Will the great games of the future be firstperson shooters? Well, it's likely; people have shown no signs of falling out of love with them, after all. But the trouble is you can only do three things in firstperson: hide, explore, or shoot things. If you're in the firstperson you're pretty much a human, so you're dealing with things on that scale. (For all his toilet-straining antics, Cthulhu did as least have the interesting property of being several hundred metres tall.)

Oh, who am I kidding? At the time of writing everyone seems to be raving about *The Last Of Us*. Yes, it features a bearded toughie with psychological issues and a determined girl in a post-apocalyptic world through which spore-infested zombies mooch, squealing and biting people. It is, apparently, amazing, because it's done so well. I wish it the best of luck, and accept that I'm trying to reinvent the wheel. I started this page wondering why, when Poe, Derleth and Lovecraft could chill people so effectively, we can't make great games in the same vein. Maybe it's just that it's fine to do that in books published in the 1920s, but games naturally thrill, scare and entertain most effectively when there's an army of once-human mutants that you can't reason with, don't feel bad about dispatching, and who could be hiding around every corner. All that, plus you've got a bloody big gun.

OK, how about this? A Wii game where you straighten and style Cthulhu's tentacles, treat his hives with a topical cream and administer a giant laxative. No? Then I've got nothing.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online


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FRESH BLOOD!






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CLASH of CLANS



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Region Specific: Copenhagen

Denmark's game industry is ready to grow on an unprecedented scale

In terms of both its games and technology, Copenhagen's development scene reaches far beyond the modest confines of the city's borders. But even as its place on the global stage continues to grow, the industry itself has reached something of a glass ceiling while it awaits further investment. That's not to say it hasn't enjoyed plenty of success on its own terms. The region's biggest studio, *Hitman* developer Io-Interactive (1) (p136), has created a series that can take its place among the most iconic in videogame history. Meanwhile, MovieStarPlanet (2) (p138) has produced Europe's biggest, and safest, social network for kids. PlayDead (3) (p140) created *Limbo*, a widely lauded title that helped to cement the value of downloadable games on console platforms. And Unity Technologies (4) (p146) has achieved nothing less than upending traditional videogame development with its Unity game engine. There are less well-known contributions, too, from the likes of Reto-Moto (5) (p144), BetaDwarf (6) (p150), Cape Copenhagen (7) (p152), Full Control (8) (p152) and the Microsoft-owned Press Play, whose previous work includes *Max & The Magic Marker* (9) (p142). Many of these studios have benefited from Copenhagen's IT University (10) (p148) and organisations such as Copenhagen Capacity (11) (p148) and (12) Workindenmark (p150).


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GREAT DANES

Copenhagen's egalitarian industry culture is fostering some exciting emerging talent

LANDMARKS
1 The pedestrianised Amagertorv (Amager Square) is considered the most central square in the city.
2 Frederik's Church is known as The Marble Church by locals and boasts the largest church dome in Scandinavia.
3 Like much of the city, Nyhavn waterfront dates back to the 17th century. The name translates as 'new harbour'.
4 Sony has built an absolutely gigantic PS4 right here in Copenhagen! No, not really. This futuristic black building houses The Royal Library.
5 The city's blend of modern and medieval architecture is striking

Copenhagen's low skyline is pierced by a series of elaborate, austere spires. The Old Stock Exchange is crowned by four dragons, their entwined tails rising to 60 metres above the ground, while the black-and-golden corkscrew that sits atop The Church Of Our Saviour can be scaled thanks to an external staircase that winds around it. But these striking appeals to higher authority are somewhat at odds with the local development scene, one that is defined by its informality and deliberate drive to keep any hierarchies as squat as possible.

That informality is mixed with a forward-thinking mentality. We exchange hardly any business cards during our time in the city, most of the people we meet surprised when we offer ours rather than wait for the inevitable LinkedIn invite the following day. Job titles mean less in a culture where everybody's ideas carry equal weight and the CEO sits with everyone else for a communal, company-funded lunch every day.

Perhaps this laid-back openness is inevitable in what one local employee described as the Mediterranean of Scandinavia. The city sits on the eastern coast of Zealand, one of the Danish islands, separated from Malmö and Sweden's southern Scania region by the Øresund Strait, a stretch of water known as 'The Sound' in English. Copenhagen's 17th-century architecture is peppered with public squares, waterfront walkways and those looming spires. There's an unhurried cafe culture here, enjoyed by a friendly, multicultural population. The internationalism of the city means that almost everybody speaks English, which makes it easy for the outsider to fit in – even in the face of the high denominations of krona required for a cup of coffee.

But perhaps more striking than even those spires is the sheer number of bicycles on the road. Copenhagen is one of the most bicycle-friendly cities in the world, an achievement naturally supported by its flat terrain, and the city's roadways have been designed with bikes in mind – cyclists will often outnumber cars at red lights, and there's rarely any congestion, even during rush hour. There's the metro system as well, and for longer journeys Copenhagen Airport, the largest in the Nordic region.

Even if developers here are more easygoing than most, there's no evidence of a dip in quality when it comes to their output. But the throughline here – at least up until recently – is tech. Copenhagen's game development industry grew out of the '90s demo scene – the same one that so famously catalysed Finland's vibrant industry – and demonstrates remarkable technical aptitude and independence as a result.



Amagertorv is named after the Amager farmers who sold their produce in the square during the Middle Ages

Io-Interactive has helped define the stealth genre with its globetrotting *Hitman* series, and in Kane and Lynch created two of the most intriguing videogame antiheroes in recent memory. But, crucially, it has built its powerful in-house engines – the most recent being Glacier 2, which powers *Hitman: Absolution*'s beautiful, decaying world – from the ground up. Reto-Moto – a reborn version of the company that created Io-Interactive in a past life – has taken on the daunting task of building a crossplatform war game in *Heroes & Generals* that will allow FPS and strategy players to interact in real time across PC and mobile devices. It's built the complex back-end in-house too, naturally.

And let's not forget PlayDead, which placed so much import on getting *Limbo* just right that it built an engine that's so bespoke it can only render in black and white. It might be using Unity for its next project, but it's currently tweaking the source code to its taste too. Full Control, a self-professed creator of hardcore games, has built on Unity too, with its TX Engine, a reusable framework for turn-based games.

Which brings us to Unity's creator, Unity Technologies, a tools company whose rapid success has begun shifting developers' attentions away from tech – both in Copenhagen and the rest of the world – and helped it support the growth of indie developers such as BetaDwarf, a group of graduates who spent months squatting in a university classroom before finding their feet.

MovieStarPlanet, meanwhile, is dedicated to games in a very different way, producing a social network aimed at 'tweens' (eight- to 13-year-olds) that not only provides a portal for playing games but is also a way of teaching kids how to behave online. And Press Play, a recent addition to the Microsoft Studios family alongside the likes of 343 Industries, Rare and Lionhead, declares on its website that it creates "games for geeks, moms & extraordinary people". The small studio behind charming physics platform puzzler *Max & The Magic Marker* tries to make games that appeal to childhood memories, and the Pixar-esque trailer for its latest game, *Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood*, captures that sentiment perfectly.

The game industry here is supported by a number of organisations dedicated to attracting talent to the region, including Copenhagen Capacity and WorkinDenmark, which both seek to boost the local scene by working closely with international companies and individuals. On the education front, too, the region is bolstered by the IT University of Copenhagen's progressive approach to game courses and close links to local studios. And despite the game industry's relatively small size, Copenhagen's proximity to Malmö – a short train ride or drive across the Øresund Bridge – promotes close links between the cities, with many people commuting in both directions.

Diverse, ambitious and sporting an attitude towards development that's quite unlike any other scene, Copenhagen's game industry is undoubtedly growing. Its expansion is limited by a lack of domestic investment expertise when it comes to larger companies – a problem discussed in more detail over the page in our roundtable conversation – but with Square Enix and Microsoft already showing the way, it's surely only a matter of time before more foreign investors cotton on to the opportunity. ■

Job titles mean less in a culture where everybody's ideas carry equal weight and the CEO sits with everyone else for a communal lunch every day







ROUND THE TABLE



Key figures in Copenhagen's gaming industry discuss funding, informality and the indie scene







Christian Elverdam
Gameplay director, Io-Interactive



Hannes Seifert
General manager, Io-Interactive



Claus Lykke Jensen
CEO and founder, MovieStarPlanet



Arnt Jenssen
Director, Playdead



Dino Patti
CEO, Playdead



Rune Dittmer
Co-founder and studio director, Press Play



Martin Munk Pollas
Co-founder, Reto-Moto



Joachim Ante
CTO, Unity

The HQ of Io-Interactive plays host to today's discussion, our meeting table flanked by a row of super-deformed Agent 47s standing watch on shelves along one wall, and life-size statues of Kane & Lynch – apparently engaged in a dispute – on the other. Aside from the menagerie of game characters, IOI is represented by general manager **Hannes Seifert** and gameplay director **Christian Elverdam**. **Martin Munk Pollas**, who helped to found both IOI and **Reto-Moto**, is here too, along with Unity CTO **Joachim Ante**, Press Play studio director **Rune Dittmer** and MovieStarPlanet CEO **Claus Lykke Jensen**. PlayDead director **Arnt Jensen** and CEO **Dino Patti** round out the group. After seeing off a stack of sandwiches, we set about the benefits of informality, Copenhagen's close relationship with Malmö, and why international investors should be taking a serious look at the region.

For you, what's great about Copenhagen?

Hannes Seifert What I really like about it is it's size. It's quite a small city, but it feels very metropolitan at the same time. For me it's the epitome of the modern city when you consider its public transportation, its accommodation of bicycles, the mix of modern and old architecture. People here know how to party, but they also know how to relax. Overall, it's a combination that's hard to find anywhere else in the world.

Joachim Ante When you live here it's normal, but the number of bicycles is a beautiful thing. I almost had to cry when I first came here and saw these big queues of bicycles at the lights that are bigger than the queues of cars. That's how it should be.

Martin Munk Pollas I spoke to some of our foreign employees before coming here today, and it looks like they agree with all of that. They noted the quality of life here in general, and said that local people were very friendly and helpful. And of course almost everybody speaks English.

HS That's a really good point. I think I've met fewer than four people in my past four years here that did not speak English.

And what would you say characterises the development scene here?

Dino Patti It's small!

HS I personally like the mix of talent here. There are a lot of extremely creative people here, and there's a lot of technical talent too. Both can be found elsewhere, of course, but the combination at this level is rare. I think that comes with being a smaller country: you think beyond your borders.

Claus Lykke Jensen There's very little hierarchy in companies here; we all have very flat structures. I think this means people take more ownership of the task, and that gives better results. Because everybody contributes to where the company's going, it's not just one person directing everything.

Christian Elverdam If you look at the quality of what's produced compared to how many people are here, I think the standard is pretty incredible. Normally you'd attribute that kind of work to teams of hundreds of people. But one big US studio could almost be equivalent to the entire Danish scene!

JA It seems to me that the proportion of small startup companies and really small productions is very high in Copenhagen, which makes for an interesting indie scene. It's very strong – especially considering there aren't that many bigger studios. I mean, there's basically… IOI. [Laughter.]

HS There was a core demo scene in the '80s and '90s, which I come from, and that's still felt. I encounter people all the time that I met sending disks or letters to in the past. Many of these people stayed in the industry and I think that is perhaps one of the reasons for this mix: because it required you to be very technical – it was all about showing off – but also to be creative.

"I almost had to cry when I first came here and saw these big queues of bicycles at the lights that are bigger than the queues of cars. That's how it should be"

Is that a contributing factor to many older studios' focus on in-house tech here?

HS I think we like to push boundaries. And to push boundaries you sometimes have to produce your own tech. I'm not religious about using our own technology, but wherever you can make a real difference with it, you should.

MMP I think there's also a tradition that many products here started life as tech: you'd make the tech and then figure out what to build around it. I'm not saying that's the right way to go about doing a game, but that happened quite a lot!

CE And I think that still happens today. I mean, look at us: we're very open to the fact that some guy could invent something, and then that could turn into a game feature if we find the right application for it. The crowd system in the *Hitman* games started just as a mental challenge: how many characters can we render? It didn't have any real AI, if you look back at *Blood Money* for instance, but then obviously it became a tech challenge to try to build crowds on a new level. Those kind of evolutions come about partly because it's close to the core fantasy of what we do, but also partly because there are people here who really like the intellectual challenge of tackling a problem like that. And I think that goes across every company – you have people that are deeply invested in the technology.

Rune Dittmer The short answer is that Danish coders really like a challenge! But I'd like to challenge your initial observation a bit: I come from a very non-tech company and we've been based in Unity from day one. And I think the majority of companies our size – 25 and under – are using licensed tech now. I think these companies are being founded by younger people than IOI was, perhaps, coming out of ITU [the IT University of Copenhagen] or other universities who weren't part of any demo or tech scene, and they have a different perspective on technology. There's a lot of focus on design in education, and I think many of the younger Danish companies are design-driven rather than tech-driven now. We definitely count as one of those.

CLJ We're also not particularly tech-orientated, instead focusing on experience and users. We really don't want to have to invent any tech, we just want to invent gameplay and games. And we have had a lot of people come to the company from ITU, which attracts people from all different kinds of backgrounds: some are programmers, some are nurses, some are engineers. They come to the MSc in Games with bachelor degrees from so many other paths and that gives a really broad knowledge. I think that builds upon what we had with the demo scene in the old days, creating a much broader audience – not just the core, but other people who are interested in making games. It's fantastic that we have ITU in Denmark.

HS On that point, it's worth noting that Denmark is much more equal opportunities-orientated than many other countries, which I think is also part of the reason why there's so much talent coming from all directions. As a society we're very equal. Diversity allows you to make internationally appealing games for a broad audience and you need different inputs otherwise you can't shape and polish your games.

So do studios get involved with ITU's courses?

CE We have a lot of guys from ITU – I'm one of them myself! At the moment we have a great programming and technical Masters team that are doing procedural content studies that we think are interesting. What ITU really understands is how to integrate business and education without being overly commercial in its thinking

RD But to answer your question more directly, we do feedback as well. For example, participating in guest lectures and activities around that. And I personally try to play through the projects each semester to keep an eye on up and coming talent.

HS I think it's important in our industry to follow academic trends. Because sometimes they'll be research that might not be applicable today, but it points to where you can be in five years and that's really interesting.

CLJ We value kids' safety highly – it's one of our top priorities – so we actually have somebody at ITU researching how we can improve online safety in our games. How can we better prioritise our moderators? So it's not just game design, but also infrastructure and content management. And, as a company, we also started in ITU's incubator.

Considering the ever-increasing importance of middleware, has it been a boon having Unity on your doorstep?

CLJ While we're not using Unity ourselves, I think a lot of companies locally have gained from that proximity. Some of the companies already had close relationships, of course, and that helps Unity to know what devs want, too.

JA We're much more globally orientated than we used to be, of course, but we still do a lot of talks in Copenhagen. We get involved in local game jams too, for example.

DP Actually I think we used that closeness quite a lot – we had a programmer visiting us regularly. Unity's so big now, though, that it's getting hard to get special features put in! [Laughter.]

JA Yeah, but with PlayDead there's some features that you guys are working on – you actually have access to the software and there's some features that go into Unity, as far as I know?

Arnt Jenssen Sometimes, yeah! It's a pretty close collaboration.

JA We meet up with studios and often get ideas. But a lot of that is also coming through mailing lists because obviously we don't want to *only* cater to Copenhagen. It's very important for us to be global. We have a pretty big field engineering team whose members are located all over the world, but since a lot of engineers are actually in Copenhagen and they don't spend that much time going around the world themselves, in that sense there's a slightly different connection to studios here. Engineers working on features not only talk directly to studios but also know developers personally. I know some of the guys working on Unity today helped PlayDead ship *Limbo*, and we've got some former IOI employees too, so there's a big mixture.

There's a surprising informality to the way studios work and interact here. Where do you think that comes from?

RD You're right, it's very open compared to other scenes. I have five to ten game executives that I will share basically everything with. From everything I hear – and most of that is from other Microsoft studios these days – that is very unique to Copenhagen, that we are so open with so many potential competitors. I think as a people we Danes enjoy informality almost to the point that it gets a bit complicated when we try to integrate with the rest of the world! [Laughter.] I think we celebrate it, and personally I think it's a very positive thing, but it makes it difficult for us sometimes to have foreign employees coming in, or to interact with other organisations like publishing partners and whatnot. If we see something that's even slightly formal, we get a bit scared, and I think it's something that we need to work on: to not let the informality become impolite, because I think it does that sometimes.

HS I know what you mean. Sometimes, perhaps when you interact with Asian business partners, for example, you need to be a bit different, but overall I think it's a very good balance. One of our foreign employees once said that the Danes consider themselves the Mediterranean of Scandinavia, and I think that shows in the culture.

CE I think some level of informality is generally the case in this industry, right? But I think it's surprising to others that it's also like that at the corporate level here. It is informal but it's not always that way – especially when you meet people from other countries, for example.

CLJ But the really positive thing about it is that it's all to do with the fact that there's much less hierarchy in companies here. So I think what that really means is that people feel they can say whatever they like to anybody in the company without having to go through a chain of people. And I think that makes more ideas come out. Ideas that might not surface in other countries maybe have a higher chance of being produced here because of this informality and lack of hierarchy.

CE I think because of this culture, on an individual level people expect influence, and to be heard no matter what function they might have in the company. And a significant part of how we organise ourselves is around that. Obviously we need to make decisions and do all sorts of other official stuff, but to some people it's a real culture shock: that not only do a lot of different people express their opinions on a lot of different matters, but also that they are required to do so themselves to some extent. So if you're very silent and just expect to get told what to do, then people might look at you strangely and ask if you're OK! Here, people demand to be heard and to be able to express themselves. It's perhaps more acute in the creative industry, but it's also throughout society in general, I believe.

"Danes enjoy informality almost to the point that it gets a bit complicated when we try to integrate with the rest of the world. I think we celebrate it"



DP It's important to me that people can wear slippers if they want. [Laughter.]
RD We've had employees borrowing formal shoes from each other when they had to go to funerals, because they didn't have any of their own!
JA That's really interesting. I always thought ensuring people had a lot of input on a lot of things was a Unity thing. It's a massive culture shock for the people we employ from the States. When they come from a US perspective, they're like, "Why is one of my developers, who doesn't know anything about business, telling me how to do this thing? What the fuck?" I always thought that was Unity culture, but I now see that it's perhaps a wider Denmark thing, that we have this very open culture where ideas can come from anywhere, and the best ideas survive.

Do you think your proximity to Sweden offers any benefits?
RD I think for this feature we could have considered inviting studios from Malmö as well, because I think there are a lot of developers going across the bridge, commuting either way. To that extent, even though we say the Copenhagen scene is rather small we could easily include the Malmö scene in that – which adds a Ubisoft studio of a few hundred devs! [Laughter.] I think the two cities are pretty integrated. I mean, I don't have any Swedish executives that I hang out with or discuss business secrets with, but I think on an employee level they do.
HS We have quite a few employees that commute. There are two currencies, of course, and things like that, but there are a lot of agreements between the countries – it's a pretty fluent relationship.
CE If you take the Malmö region even outside of the game industry it's very connected because obviously it's a smaller city right next to a capital city, right? It makes sense. If you define the Copenhagen area, in a way, Malmö should be included, because so much is exchanged.
HS Copenhagen airport is actually halfway between Copenhagen and Malmö, too!

Does the government provide much financial support for game developers here?
RD I think, looking in from the outside, it appears more involved than it actually is. There are schemes available, and we're well aware that not everywhere is as lucky. But I think the fact of the matter is that the schemes are rather small. They've definitely had an impact on the number of small studios that are able to put forward ideas, but I still think we should ask for better, and more extensive, schemes.



HS My impression is that it's mostly involved in incubation, focusing on startups and training. That's obviously a good thing, but as you get larger you grow out of these benefits. There's nothing here that compares with, say, Canada or Finland.
RD I think an important distinction to be made is that the schemes that do exist are all arts schemes, so nothing like the Finnish and Canadian ones that are thought of as business or industry aid. The Danish schemes all revolve around culture and art and are about ensuring that Danish games are being produced here, but not necessarily about growing the industry.
CE I completely agree that it lacks ambition and an understanding of how big an industry gaming really is. We are reaching out globally, and in that sense it doesn't really fit the bill right now.
RD It would be awesome if we had something like Finland's Tekes fund, something that's not necessarily driven from an art perspective but is still benefiting a broader industry. I think we should be happy there's a European arts grant in Denmark, but from my perspective it's more important to attract more private investment. And, at least for the first few years, they'll have to come from outside because I don't think there's a great deal of games investment expertise in Denmark.

Could your close links with Malmö provide a possible answer?
RD I've been in meetings where that has been discussed, but I've yet to see it happen.
HS I think in Europe it's still very difficult to work with a national institution across international borders. I've seen successful programmes on the European network, but I think when it comes to cross-country co-operation it's usually more successful when it's not driven by a national government. It's no different in the UK – some of these schemes have to be driven more centrally to work. I think there's still a long way to go. Funding and subsidies should never distort business, but I think they're distorting it to our disadvantage in some areas right now. There's a lot of things around, especially in terms of Copenhagen's infrastructure and all the benefits, that people take for granted – many things are cheap compared to other countries or even free, not least our education! That's very good here, but there are other areas too. I think that's good to know when you're considering this city. And when it comes to investment, I think it's worth pointing out that Denmark is the least corrupt country in the world!
MMP A general problem when it comes to investment in games in Denmark is that companies and organisations here aren't willing to take a risk with bigger setups – two people making a huge success is what they want to invest in.
RD But if you look at the smaller successes here, like *Limbo* or *Subway Surfers* [an endless runner created by Kiloo Games, based in Denmark's second largest city, Aarhus], you'll have either Fund Cat [a venture capital fund established as part of the CAT Science Park] or public funding. So in all of those successes, local investment played a role at some point – often at the earliest stages.
MMP Yeah, but my point is that it would be nice if they were willing to take a bigger risk and not get scared off by, say, a 20 million krona budget or something like that.

How can that be addressed?
DP We need to make more successes, of course. But we also need to find money internationally.
HS I think that's a much easier solution.
RD I think for European investors in general, and especially UK-based companies, there's a real opportunity here because the Danes lack that expertise. I think many of the companies are ready for it – they've been pretty well prepared and I think they would thrive with private funding. And you could probably get them at a bargain price right now! [Laughter] ■

Io-Interactive

The home of *Hitman* strikes the balance between corporate and indie sensibilities



Founded 1998
Location Copenhagen
Employees 117
Key staff Hannes Seifert (studio head), Christian Elverdam (creative director)
URL www.ioi.dk
Selected softography *Freedom Fighters, Kane & Lynch, Hitman: Blood Money, Mini Ninjas, Hitman: Absolution*
Current projects Unannounced project



Io-Interactive employees can take advantage of the building's decked rooftop terrace, complete with barbecue area, that overlooks the water



STUDIO INSIGHT
Hannes Seifert
Studio head
Christian Elverdam
Creative director





Few videogame studios can boast an action lead as iconic as Agent 47, hero of the *Hitman* series for close to 13 years. Io-Interactive can also lay claim to *Freedom Fighters*, *Kane & Lynch* and *Mini Ninjas*. Square Enix acquired the studio, which is currently working on a yet-to-be announced *Hitman* title, when former owner Eidos was merged with the Japanese publisher in 2009.

We talk to studio head **Hannes Seifert** and creative director **Christian Elverdam** about the studio's reputation for strong technical and creative teams, and striving to retain the flat structure on which it was built.

You've announced that you're focusing on *Hitman* right now over other projects.
HS I strongly believe that to be a good studio you need to have a strong focus. We need to make one thing a priority now, and then we can look at something else further down the line. If you try to do a lot of stuff at once, most of it will be below par.
CE We've just released *Hitman: Absolution*, and we felt we managed to bring *Hitman* back after a pretty long hiatus. We really feel that we can do more within that space. It means quite a lot for a studio: since there isn't an authority saying 'this is what you do', and we have such a flat structure, it actually helps us a lot to have focus – a lot of ideas get generated over the lunch table.

Could you give us an example of that open culture?
CE The Contracts mode in *Absolution* came about when we realised that there's always been this desire from *Hitman* fans to make their own levels, and we started playing around with the idea of how to do that. So some of this kind of stuff starts rather organically, because we want to empower the people who work here. It's pretty central – we need free-thinking individuals.
HS Obviously when you invest a high amount of money into games you need to have some level of control, but we try to be as flat as we can. We're also pretty open-minded too. For example, Christian and myself sit in an open space – we don't have our own rooms. People know they can approach us. Not everybody goes to the studio head every day, of course, but we try to have as few barriers between the teams and people that manage the projects as possible.

What with *Assassin's Creed, Dishonored* and the return of *Thief* – to name a few – the assassination space is becoming crowded. Does this worry you?
CE I think it's great. It means there's a real desire from people to play these games. Obviously, competition is competition; we need to be serious about what's unique in what we're doing and vice versa, but there is a strong future for stealth play.
HS As long as we're leading the gameplay, then we're very comfortable. As long as others try to follow our gameplay, we're in a good spot.
CE Every time we create a level, through all of the *Hitman* games, we always ask ourselves 'What makes this a *Hitman* setting?' And just the fact there is such a thing as a '*Hitman* version' of things is exactly what we're talking about here. We create experiences that no one else does, and we're really proud of that. ■



зультаты превосходят наши ожидания

Assassination is in our DNA

Io-Interactive.

MovieStarPlanet

The free-to-play developer that wants minnows, not whales



Founded 2008
Location Copenhagen
Employees 100+
Key staff Claus Lykke Jensen (CEO & founder), Peer Jacobsen (CTO), Jacob Schulz Jørgensen (CFO), Dennis Englund (CMO), Vernon Jones (head of safety)
URL www.moviestarplanet.com
Current projects *MovieStarPlanet* and unannounced projects



The walls of MovieStarPlanet's offices are decorated with scenes from its game and a number of disarmingly cute in-game pets, called Boonies

STUDIO INSIGHT
Claus Lykke Jensen
CEO and co-founder



MovieStarPlanet is a name shared by both the studio and the child-focused social network it has built. Among other distractions, the website allows users to create their own movie star avatar, write and direct short films in which they can cast their friends, and play a selection of minigames.

It's built on robust educational foundations, and driven by a deeply rooted concern for the online safety of its players. We talk with founder and CEO **Claus Lykke Jensen** and communications manager **Helene Towers** to discuss the delicate art of making money while acting responsibly.



How many players does *MovieStarPlanet* have right now?

CLJ We've just reached 100 million profiles. That doesn't mean 100 million kids playing, but we really do have a *lot* of users. In the western world we are the biggest social site for this age group. *Moshi Monsters* is bigger in the UK, but we are much larger across the rest of Europe.

How do you convince protective parents that you can provide a safe environment for their children?

CLJ Safety is our main priority, so we encourage parents to get involved – not just in our game, but in games in general and other social networks. Just like you have to teach kids how to cross a road, you also need to teach them how to act on the Internet. Not every parent gets involved, of course, so we see it as our responsibility to do what we can – just like schools should be doing. It's a joint effort, but we are a very important part of that.

HT We were awarded POSCON membership status this year. It's a European 'thematic network' of 15 organisations that produce safe online content for kids.

CLJ Our head of safety, Vernon [Jones], is actually a former social worker and has been working on Internet safety for over ten years for organisations such as Save The Children.

How do you square responsible practice with micro-transactions and the need to turn a profit?

CLJ Because we're targeting the kids market, as well as safety, we also think about spending money. We really want to be a responsible company, we don't want to be one of those that exploits players – because we think it's both wrong and a bad business decision in the long run. We have spending limits, so kids can only spend a certain amount within a given timeframe. If we want parents to know us as a safe and responsible company, we can't ask too much.

So you actively avoid whales?

CLJ We don't want them at all! We're probably one of the few companies who doesn't! Because we have so many users, if we can get a lot of them to spend a little then we don't need to have them spending thousands.

There's an industry snobbery towards kids' games – does that bother you?

CLJ I remember once we walked into a class where the teacher hadn't told them we were coming. These 30 kids were sat on the computers, and there were five of us going there to get feedback. When the teacher said, "These guys are from MovieStarPlanet," they started screaming like we were celebrities! We just want to make the best products we can, that kids will enjoy the most. ■

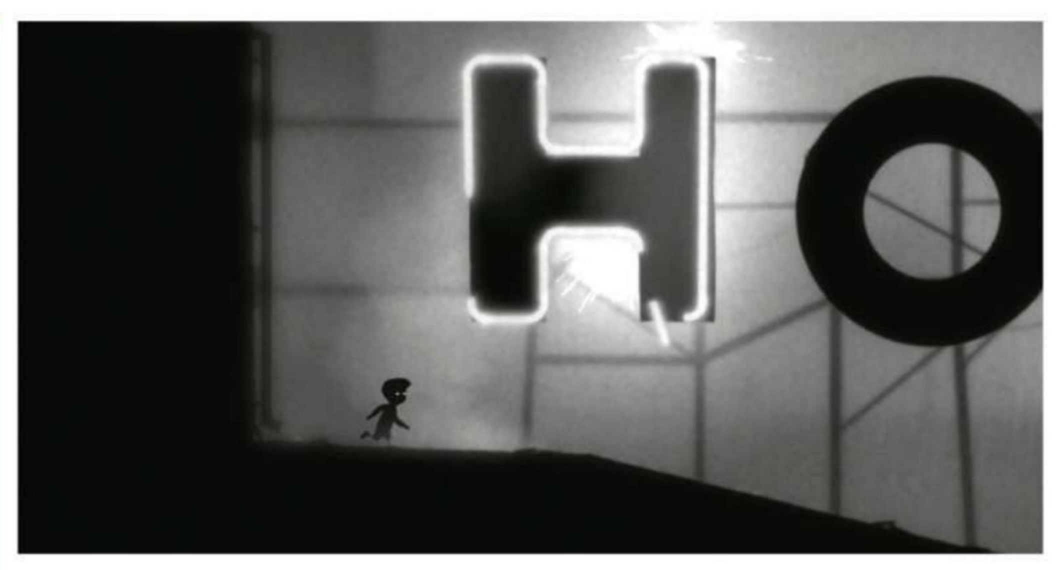

THE SECRET TO OUR SUCCESS...
MOVIESTAR PLANET

Playdead

Like *Limbo*'s protagonist, its creator isn't afraid to punch well above its weight

PLAYDEAD

Founded 2006
Location Denmark
Employees 26
Key staff Arnt Jensen (creative director), Dino Patti (studio director)
URL www.limbogame.org
Selected softography *Limbo*
Current projects *Project 2*



Limbo **is one of the most recognisable titles of the modern console gaming era, and now its haunting story is being retold on iPad, too**



STUDIO INSIGHT
Arnt Jensen
Creative director
Dino Patti
Studio director







Despite its modest size, Playdead is one of the most recognisable studios in the region, having shot to prominence – and financial independence – with its haunting, monochrome XBLA adventure *Limbo*. The expanding team has recently moved to larger offices and is currently working on the follow-up to its wildly successful debut, a platform adventure simply known as *Project 2* at this point. A small contingent of the team has spent the past year working on an iPad port of *Limbo*, too. We talk to the founders, creative director **Arnt Jensen** and studio director **Dino Patti**, about the challenge of porting a game that helped define one platform to another, and the importance of taking your time.

The iPad version of *Limbo* feels like a natural fit. Was it difficult to get the controls just right?
AJ Getting the controls right has been *the* challenge. We've been talking about doing the iPad version more or less since we launched *Limbo*, but I was really scared about having to use virtual controls. We only got started when I had an idea for how we could make an intuitive touch control scheme, but we talked about it for a year before we decided to make that a priority.
DP The other issue was getting the graphics right.
AJ At some points we've got 70 layers going on, and this can be a challenge for any platform!

So is it running on the same engine as the Xbox version?
AJ It's still our engine but we've been optimising it constantly.
DP That engine maxed out the 360 and ran at 30fps. But we got it running at 60fps on the iPad in the end.

That sounds like a lot of work to port a relatively small game.
DP We always want to make a proper port. We hate it when others do it poorly.
AJ If it didn't sell, we would start blaming ourselves for not doing a proper job – and that would be the worst thing. We always wanted it perfect. I don't think people know how much effort we put into our stuff because every time that we did a relaunch on a platform, the people expect us to have done more levels and extra content, but it would take us forever to do that. We were working for half a year just to get the controls right!

You've switched to Unity for your new project. How did you find the transition from bespoke engine to prefab?
AJ There are good and bad aspects. We have the source code for the engine so we're making a lot of modifications to make our pipeline easier and faster, but it has been really great to have this huge fundament for every console. We don't have to think about anything – we almost just push a button and then it's out on Xbox, PlayStation or whatever. That's pretty cool, I think.
DP We're still at the mercy of Unity's decisions, which is scary from a business perspective, but I'm pretty sure that if they don't make something we need we'll make it ourselves.
AJ I think in the long run it's a good decision for us, especially with such a small team, because it's a really big effort to make your own engines. ■

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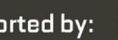
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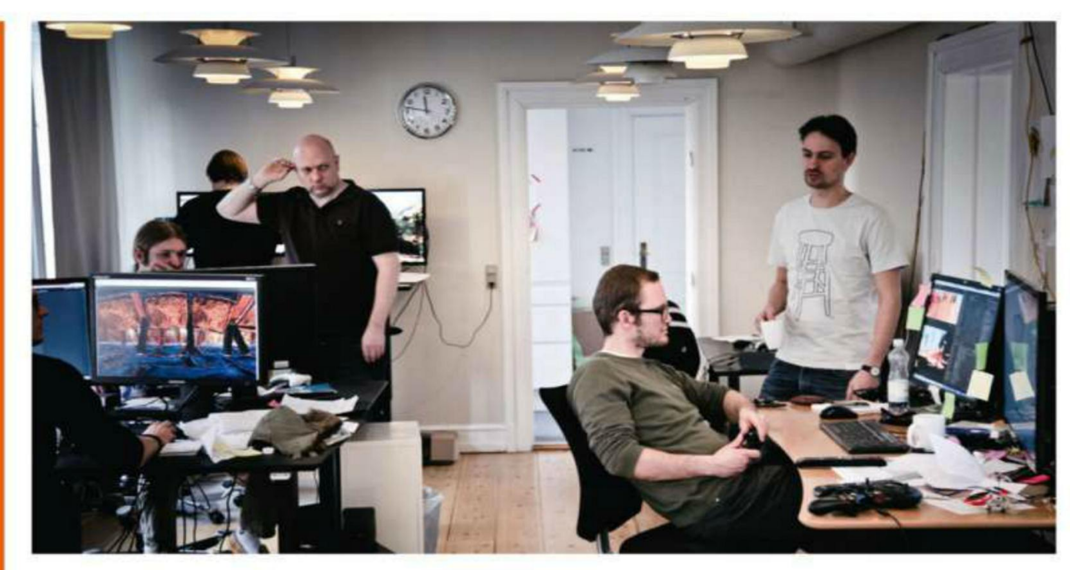


Press Play

Microsoft acquisition has dulled none of this studio's indie spirit



Founded 2006
Location Copenhagen
Employees 18
Key staff Rune Dittmer (co-founder and studio director), Ole Teglbjærg (co-founder), Mikkel Thorsted (studio director)
URL www.pressplay.dk
Selected softography *Max & the Magic Marker, Tentacles: Enter The Dolphin*
Current projects *Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood*



A visit to Press Play's Copenhagen HQ reveals none of the corporate atmosphere you might expect from a studio that is owned by Microsoft



STUDIO INSIGHT
Rune Dittmer
Co-founder and studio director



Press Play was founded by three graduates who had the noble ambition of fixing what they saw as a gimmicky Flash scene. "Turned out we needed clients," co-founder and studio director **Rune Dittmer** laughs, "so we did what everybody else did anyway: advertising games for ice cream and TV shows." Fortunately, that wasn't the end of the dream – advergame fatigue spurred the team on to create WiiWare game *Max & The Magic Marker*, which got the studio noticed. Last year it was acquired by Microsoft and is now working on *Max: Curse Of Brotherhood*, a spiritual successor to its breakthrough release.

How's life under Microsoft ownership treating you?
We're enjoying it a lot. I think the general concept of being independent is a difficult one: if you don't have any money to do the games you want to do, that's not independence at all. I think we've got very good terms when it comes to creative freedom, and Microsoft has been very hands-off. My boss is in Redmond, so that's a nine-hour time difference and at least 15 in travel – there's no microadministration! We feel really free. I guess originally being work-for-hire, then switching to our own IP, we were never afraid of working with partners – we published on iOS with EA, for example, and had all kinds of deals for localised versions of *Max*. We needed all the funding we could get. With Microsoft that part of it has become easier; the rest has pretty much stayed the same.

In terms of presentation, at least, *Curse Of Brotherhood* looks like a significant step up from *Magic Marker*.
The voice acting for the game was done in LA, but we did all the animation here. It was kind of a focus for us a few years back to raise our game, and our graphics, and I'm very glad we succeeded with that. There was a marked difference in terms of interest in the company and job applications once we released the *Curse Of Brotherhood* footage. It's kind of like, 'Oh, they're a completely different studio than I thought they were…' For us, we've been that studio for two or three years, so the change hasn't felt that rapid here. We've got at least three projects on the go right now – that's a lot for such a small team.

Multiple projects? Is this easier under Microsoft's ownership?
Before Microsoft acquired us, it was a necessity to work on more than one title in order to negate risks. Now it's more a preference for us. And if we're going to have a constant staff level of around 25 people, we can't have only one title in the very early stages, because then we'll have to scale back to five. In order to have a culture where people have job security and enjoy being around, you can't go back and forth in terms of team size. The challenge is how we do that as games become more service-orientated. We're just getting started on viewing our games like that. We've been focused on shipping dates, and after the shipping date there might be a patch, but the product is done.

How have you found working with Xbox One?
We not really taking the 'what can we do with all this power?' approach, we're more interested in what we can do with Kinect. I'm pretty amazed by it, actually, it seems to have a very high fidelity, and compared with what we did with the old Kinect it's almost latency-free. ■

Reto-Moto

The former Io-Interactive devs prepare to unleash a war with *Heroes & Generals*

RETO-MOTO

Founded 2007
Location Copenhagen
Employees 32
Key staff Martin Munk Pollas (co-founder)
URL www.reto.dk
Current projects *Heroes & Generals*





The *Heroes & Generals* team has expanded so much in the past few years that the studio is now looking to relocate to larger offices



Reto-Moto was originally founded in 1997 and was the parent company of Io-Interactive. After it was sold to UK publisher Eidos in 2004, the founding members of Reto-Moto reformed the company along with a number of IOI developers. Since then, the team has been slowly growing as work on its ambitious cross-format war game *Heroes & Generals* continues. Currently in open beta, the game combines RTS, firstperson shooter and management gameplay styles across mobile and PC platforms, with the actions of FPS players directly affecting the wider campaign for RTS players. Company co-founder **Martin Munk Pollas** sets out what the studio hopes to achieve with its vision of highly connected online warfare.

On the Reto-Moto website you say that you want to take advantage of the changing marketplace. How exactly are you doing that?

We wanted to use the fact that people are present on a lot of different platforms now. The whole philosophy of our game is that you're taking part in something much bigger, no matter where you play. We have the action game, which should appeal to the traditional gamer, and then we have the web part of it which is where we host our strategic game. There's also a mobile app – called *Mobile Command* – that's hooked into the strategic site, through which you can follow the war and help their faction, not just play some casual game that doesn't really tie into anything.

You're a small studio – how are you coping with so much to do?

Of course it's a huge task and we knew that when we set out. But we didn't realise *quite* how big a task it would be. Our ambitions haven't changed; we're just taking it one step at a time.

Why did you decide to abandon the original subscription model?

We realised that everybody else was moving away from that. We tried to hold on to it for a little while longer because we liked the idea of knowing how many subscribers we had! But we realised it would be beneficial for the game if we could add an in-game store. We still have a premium membership – it's not quite a sub, but it's close because it will give you some added benefits when you pay this monthly fee. But right now we're working hard on trying to balance in-game purchases, and we're early on in that process.

The game seems ideally suited to PS4 and Xbox One – are you considering versions for those systems?

Our initial plan was to be on more platforms than PC and mobile, and we're not going to rule that out. But of course it takes a *lot* of resources. We can manage that, but the tough part would be figuring out how we structure it. We've had talks with Microsoft about this project, and it was really interested, but because it doesn't really sit in one department within Microsoft, we never managed to get the right people within the company to say, "Yeah, we're going to do this."

You're one of many developers focusing on a single game – do you think this trend will continue?

That's a difficult question, because you're very vulnerable if you only have one product. I don't know what the trend is going to be, but I think you'll see more companies like this because publishers will pick up on the successes. ■

Unity Technologies

The company that wants everyone to be able to make games



Founded 2001
Location Copenhagen
Employees 80
Key staff Erik Juhl (development director)
URL unity3d.com





Unity Technologies is happy to share its lakeside premises, hosting regular PirateCamps during which it offers temporary residences to its users



Erik Juhl
Development director



You'll probably have heard of Unity Technologies: despite being founded just nine years ago, the company's mantra of democratising game development has seen Unity grow from a focused OS X game creation tool to one of the most widely used engines in existence today. The most recent figures claim 1.9 million registered developers, with a monthly active number of 400,000. We talk with development director **Erik Juhl**, who explains how the company is preparing for the next generation, and the importance of grassroots support.

How do you think your European conference, Unite Nordic, went?
We think it went very well. David [Helgason, co-founder]'s keynote address got people excited when we announced that basic mobile deployment is now free. But it may surprise you to hear that Unite China has practically become our main Unite event now, just in terms of numbers and interest. I think we saw something like three times the attendance in Shanghai than we did in Amsterdam last year, and San Francisco the year before.

How are you preparing for next-generation development?
We've taken the guys who are already supporting 360, PS3 and Wii and built teams around them to support Nintendo, Microsoft and Sony's new consoles for the foreseeable future. And we're going to become much more modular: because of all these different platforms, we want to do platform-specific updates that don't require the full editor download. The other major change is how we're growing internally. Obviously we have more people, and more people means we have to figure out how to maintain this flat structure and global communication.

Other than The Butterfly Effect, Unity tends to avoid showy demos. Do you think that air of pragmatism has contributed to your success?
That's an interesting observation. You're right, we *do* tend to err on the side of pragmatism, but at the same time we've also tried to address the needs of those who need to see something a little showier. So we did The Butterfly Effect demo to showcase DX11, but what we generally value is more direct feedback. It comes back to pragmatism – we like to provide a demo and tech examples for people, to say this is how you use Unity to do this, and start a conversation with developers. That being said, we're also now building up a demo team in Stockholm because we've heard from our users that it makes it much easier for them to get their studio heads to accept Unity if they can show what it's capable of!

We can't imagine that appeals like those happen so much with Unreal Engine or CryEngine.
No, it's usually the other way round. It's the studio heads coming in and going, "This technology is for everyone." I used to be at Midway Games in Chicago, and it was decided that every game would be made using Unreal 3. That was really difficult because at the time it didn't even run on PS3; and we had a bunch of sports titles that had to run at 60fps, and Unreal didn't run at 60fps. A lot of times we hear stories of guys going home from their day jobs at EA or Activision or whatever and firing up Unity to tinker around with their own game ideas and prototyping. Then for the next project at their company, they say, "Hey, why aren't we using Unity?" And it just goes from there. ■

Copenhagen Capacity

The public-funded organisation that's seeking international talent

COPENHAGEN CAPACITY

Founded 1993
Location Copenhagen
Employees 53
Key staff Nikolaj Lubanski (director of talent department)
URL www.copcap.com



Copenhagen Capacity works closely with Danish developers

STUDIO INSIGHT
Nikolaj Lubanski
Director of talent department



Copenhagen Capacity is a non-profit agency promoting investment in Denmark's capital. Over the past 20 years it has attracted international businesses to Copenhagen and worked with those already there, and helped to develop Interactive Denmark, a cluster built for the game industry. We talk to **Nikolaj Lubanski**, director of Copenhagen Capacity's talent department, about the importance of thinking globally.

How important is it to bring international businesses to Copenhagen?
In a global market, competition has increased among the different regions in Europe. The importance of our mission has therefore been increasing over the last couple of years. The national and regional governments have increased their efforts to make Copenhagen an attractive place to do business.

How closely do you work with local videogame companies?
We work very closely with the companies in our region, such as IO Interactive and Microsoft Development Center. These companies are closely involved in our attraction efforts. The business clusters we facilitate are based on local companies, but the business environment they create becomes in itself a reason why foreign companies want to invest in Copenhagen.

What does Copenhagen have to offer foreign investors and companies?
There are a number of business areas where Copenhagen is world-leading, such as biotech and medical technology, ICT, design and cleantech. So in these areas there's a very attractive and innovative business environment to become a part of. Furthermore, it's very easy to set up a company in Denmark; everything can be settled within 24 hours. The flexible workforce here is also an asset; the level of education is high and the working culture is highly efficient.

How much of your effort is directed at the videogame industry? Do you see it as a key domestic and export power?
The videogame industry is an upcoming industry with great potential, which is why we've supported it over the past years through an initiative called Copenhagen Entertainment, which then transformed into Interactive Denmark. Io-Interactive is one of the flagships, but there is a large pool of upcoming companies.

You work with graduates too. What does that entail?
We focus on local and international students at Danish universities. We've created a talent development programme called the Youth Goodwill Ambassador Corps, which consists of more than 200 international students, the majority of whom will finalise their education in Denmark. We work to facilitate employment opportunities for international candidates with Danish companies. ■

The IT University of Copenhagen

A hub for students and the industry, ITU looks at games more deeply than most

IT UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

Founded 1999
Location Copenhagen
Students 2,500+
Key staff Miguel Sicart (head of games study programme)
URL www.itu.dk/games



ITU's striking building has a central atrium several storeys high

STUDIO INSIGHT
Miguel Sicart
Head of games study programme



The IT University of Copenhagen was among the first wave of institutions to offer game-focused courses, and currently runs a two-year Master Of Science in Games that includes both theoretical and practical aspects. We talk with the head of the games study programme, **Miguel Sicart**, to find out what the university offers, and what defines game education today.

What makes ITU such a success?
We've consistently attracted world-class researchers to work with us, both as permanent faculty and as guests. And that focus on research excellence has been paired with a close dialogue with the local industry – we have always been open to the feedback the industry can provide, and how we can better cater for their changing needs. We do this on two levels: firstly, open communication with the local community, hearing what they have to say about our programme and adapting as much as we can. On a more practical basis, we try to incorporate local devs into our teaching. We see our role in the Copenhagen community as a focal point where students can meet the industry.

Which includes game jams?
Yeah, throughout the years we've tried to establish a hub for videogame culture in Copenhagen, arranging game jams and other events. Right now, we're preparing a 'reboot' of this idea, with a focus on installation-based and local custom-made multiplayer games.

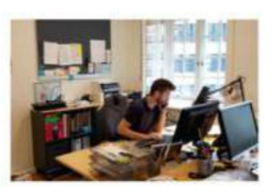
How is the MSc structured?
There are three different subprogrammes: Analysis, which focuses on researching games and their sociocultural impact; Design, which looks at the intersections between game and interaction design, with a focus on playful design and interactions; and Technology, a subprogramme centred on artificial intelligence, procedurally generated game content and game design. We offer other game courses, too – about 20 in all.

In terms of its growth and relevance to the industry, where do you think game education stands right now?
That's a complicated question. I think we are living in very challenging times for game education. Are we vocational training schools for a particular industry, or is the study and making of games a new area of knowledge? To me, the latter is obviously true, but there's pressure both from developers and politicians to make education more 'practical' and labour-market orientated. I think this is a mistake if we really want to harness the cultural potential of games and develop them as a medium – we cannot just cater for an industry. We need to think deeper and harder about why games and play matter, researching these questions from a wide variety of perspectives, from computer science and philosophy to the practical art of making games. ■



Workindenmark

A government agency set up to help new employees from abroad get a good start



Founded 2008
Location Copenhagen
Employees 30
Key staff Søren Vester Kibsgaard (recruitment consultant and Eures advisor)
URL www.workindenmark.dk



The government provides health insurance for all Danish citizens

STUDIO INSIGHT
Søren Vester Kibsgaard
Recruitment consultant and Eures advisor



Set up to advise and facilitate individuals and organisations in Denmark on recruiting from abroad, Workindenmark provides help at every stage of the process from initial recruitment to helping new employees – and their families – settle in to their new life. Applicants interested in relocating to the country can post their CVs on the government agency's website as well as browse vacancies at Danish companies. In addition, the website provides a comprehensive guide to living and working in Denmark, from information on taxes and living arrangements to recommended language courses and advice on the effects of relocating your family. We talk to recruitment consultant and Eures advisor **Søren Vester Kibsgaard** about the help and advice the organisation is able to offer.

Why should developers consider relocating to Denmark?
Denmark is known for being among the world leaders in a number of fields of production and services, and Danish business culture is characterised by a horizontal structure and open dialogue between management and employees. Much is done to ensure a good working environment: Danish companies offer good working conditions, modern facilities and high-quality technical equipment. Personal development is highly prioritised and most workplaces regularly offer continuing education to their employees.

What about their families?
Previous studies have shown that the majority of foreign national workers in Denmark felt that their quality of life increased while living in the country. This is the result of various factors, but many highlighted the positive balance between family and career here. A lot of respondents felt that Danish companies were respectful of their employees' families' lives and praised the country for being a good place to raise children. And it's worth noting that foreign nationals who come to Denmark often cite safety and security as the country's most important characteristics. Children walk to school alone, and even well-known leaders in the business community don't have to surround themselves with bodyguards. The country's parliament, the Folketing, is open to everyone and it's not unusual to see a government minister cycling through the city. Denmark has one of the lowest crime rates in the world.

Is it easy to integrate?
As a foreign national, it's possible to get by easily in Denmark without speaking Danish from the start. Danes typically speak many different foreign languages and welcome the opportunity to put these skills to use! Nearly all Danes speak English, many speak German, and one out of ten Danes speaks French. Some also speak Spanish or Italian. ■

BetaDwarf

This ambitious indie studio is juggling multiple genres as well as games



Founded 2011
Location Copenhagen
Employees 10
Key staff Steffen Kabbelgaard Grønning (CEO)
URL www.betadwarf.com

BetaDwarf's *Forced* was crowdfunded on Kickstarter

STUDIO INSIGHT
Steffen Kabbelgaard Grønning
CEO



BetaDwarf is a co-op-focused studio with a colourful history. Its two co-founders spent seven months squatting, penniless, in a disused university classroom before being discovered, subsequently moving to a shared house in the countryside and expanding to 15 staff in the process.

A successful Kickstarter campaign for debut game *Forced* allowed the group to move back to Copenhagen, and the game is now doing well on Steam Greenlight. The studio was also named Danish Developer Of The Year at the 2013 Spilprisen game awards, organised by the Danish Producers Association. CEO **Steffen Kabbelgaard Grønning** reflects on BetaDwarf's modest beginnings.

Congratulations on *Forced*'s funding success. What's the game about?
Thanks! *Forced* is a one- to four-player co-op arcade adventure with puzzle and tactical elements. Players are cast as slaves in the toughest fantasy gladiator school of them all, condemned to fight as a gladiator and eventually win their freedom. You'll face deadly trials and huge creatures, but you'll have a Spirit Mentor called Balfus to guide you on your gladiatorial journey.

Your other game, *Armies Vs Champions*, puts FPS and RTS characters together. Reto-Moto and CCP are blending genres, too – do you think this kind of gameplay will become more prevalent in the future?
I think a lot of genres have already been determined, and many designers go around thinking, 'What if I blend this genre with that genre?' I think such questions lead to design challenges that, if solved, will result in very interesting videogames and communities. The obvious one is still up for grabs – blend *FIFA* and *Modern Warfare* and you'll have world domination.

E3 was defined by networked, multiplayer experiences. Do you see this as the next major area of innovation?
More studios than ever are focusing on experiences that will get the players to stay for as long as possible, and a great way to increase longevity is by including other players. I'm not sure how healthy that is for the industry, as it leans towards a market with more monopolies where only the biggest survive.

Your Kickstarter campaign for *Forced* was heading for failure for a time. What do you think caused that, and why did it turn around so abruptly?
I think we were an unknown team with a new IP that wasn't directly aimed at being a retro remake people could relate to, and then UK devs charged in with like 15 cool projects, rendering the fight for press an equal challenge to playing *Demon's Souls* with permadeath turned on. So we tried to target something other than the games press, and made an image that conveyed the idea of living in a cardboard box with a laptop in the pursuit of a dream. It spread virally and we got the funding. ■

Cape Copenhagen

A developer that's as comfortable building hardcore shooters as it is Lego tie-ins



Founded 2008
Location Copenhagen
Employees 20
Key staff Brian Meidell (CEO)
URL www.capecph.com



The studio is still working on *Chase Ace* – just very slowly

STUDIO INSIGHT
Brian Meidell
CEO



Founded as Space Time Foam by industry veterans Peter Holm and Tobias Thorsen back in 2008, the studio has recently changed its name to Cape Copenhagen. Originally created to develop a sequel to cult shooter *Chase Ace*, unfavourable publisher offers catalysed a switch to smaller games, while the *Chase Ace* project continues in the background. CEO **Brian Meidell** takes us through the decision to rebrand, the company's relationship with Lego, and why it's important to say no occasionally.

You've changed your name recently – why the switch?
Our old name, Space Time Foam, is taken from a quantum physics theory by John Wheeler. One of our founders decided that it was a cool name for a company more than a decade ago, and it stuck. We'd been discussing a name change for a few years, because people would misspell, misremember and mispronounce our name a lot. Mostly they would be like, "Spacetime… phone?" I guess people aren't that into quantum physics.

So what's *Cape Copenhagen* all about?
We like making smaller games. We like small teams, short production cycles, polished products, and lots of creative freedom. Making games is as much about the voyage as the destination – what's the point of making games if it sucks while you're doing it?

How do you balance that ethos with the need to pay your staff?
We build a *lot* of games for other people – I think we've built about 40 in the last two years, but only a few have been our own. Mixing work-for-hire and building your own products is difficult, but it looks like we're finally managing it. We're slowly but surely putting more and more time into our own stuff and, as those things start making money, we will be able to put more time into our own games. I'd be full of crap if I pretended we didn't have to prioritise paying salaries sometimes, but one of the biggest sea changes in our company came about when we started saying no to things that didn't feel right.

You've worked a lot with Lego – how did that deal happen?
[Co-founder Peter Holm's] previous company, Titoonic, had done a lot of work with Lego, until most of its contracting moved abroad. But then one of Lego's producers decided to try someone closer to home, and found us through a common connection. We worked really well together on their online Duplo games, and it grew from there.

What's it like working with Lego?
They're great – very professional and knowledgeable about the products they're buying, not to mention their target audience. They're straightforward to work with considering the size of the company and global reach of the brand. ■

Full Control

A staunchly hardcore developer that isn't afraid to dabble with touchscreens



Founded 2004
Location Copenhagen
Employees 14
Key staff Thomas Hentschel Lund (founder)
URL www.fullcontrol.dk



***Space Hulk*'s turn-based play is closely related to the boardgame**

STUDIO INSIGHT
Thomas Hentschel Lund
Founder



Full Control was **Thomas Hentschel Lund**'s response to years spent working for other companies, an outlet for him to create the kind of tactical, turn-based strategy games he wanted to play. Since being founded as a one-man show nine years ago, it has grown to 14 staff and has managed to get nine self-produced games under its belt in between work-for-hire projects and creating its own reusable tactical game tool, TX Engine.

Full Control draws a line in the sand, saying it makes games for "old-school gamers". Why is that distinction important to you?
We believe it's important to keep making games for niche groups. We don't need to dumb down games to reach a broader audience – we can make a business out of sticking to otherwise abandoned game mechanics and genres. At the end of the day, it's because we're old-school gamers ourselves. Having your character die in the game isn't a punishment, but a learning tool – it's a *challenge*.

How does TX Engine work?
From my background in software, I've learnt a lot of lessons about what brings value to products and how to minimise risks. One factor is reusability, and building your product on top of middleware. TX Engine is our reusable framework for turn-based tactical games, which we built on top of the Unity game engine. It contains lots of modules we can reuse for every project and refine as we go along, from low-level logging systems to end-user level editors.

You've produced a number of games under contract, too. How has that affected the company's development?
We've learnt a lot of lessons when it comes to delivering on time, estimation and working with external customers. It's also paid for the development of technology that we now own which we otherwise wouldn't have been able to do ourselves. We always try to keep ownership of technology so that we can reuse it in other contexts.

Many of your games are touchscreen based, a control method that's only just beginning to shake off its association with casual games.
The rise of touch devices plays into our heritage and strategy. We were one of the first studios, for example, to offer cross-platform multiplayer functionality back in 2008. We definitely think [touchscreen controls can be a natural fit for hardcore games], but it very much depends on the game and the genre. Controlling a firstperson shooter with touch feels totally wrong, whereas they work fine for a turn-based strategy game. But designers must avoid falling into the trap of thinking you can use the same input schemes for both mouse and keyboard, and touch. They each have to be treated differently, and have to be designed with that in mind. ■


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FULL CONTROL


GAMES WORKSHOP®

#258
August 29

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